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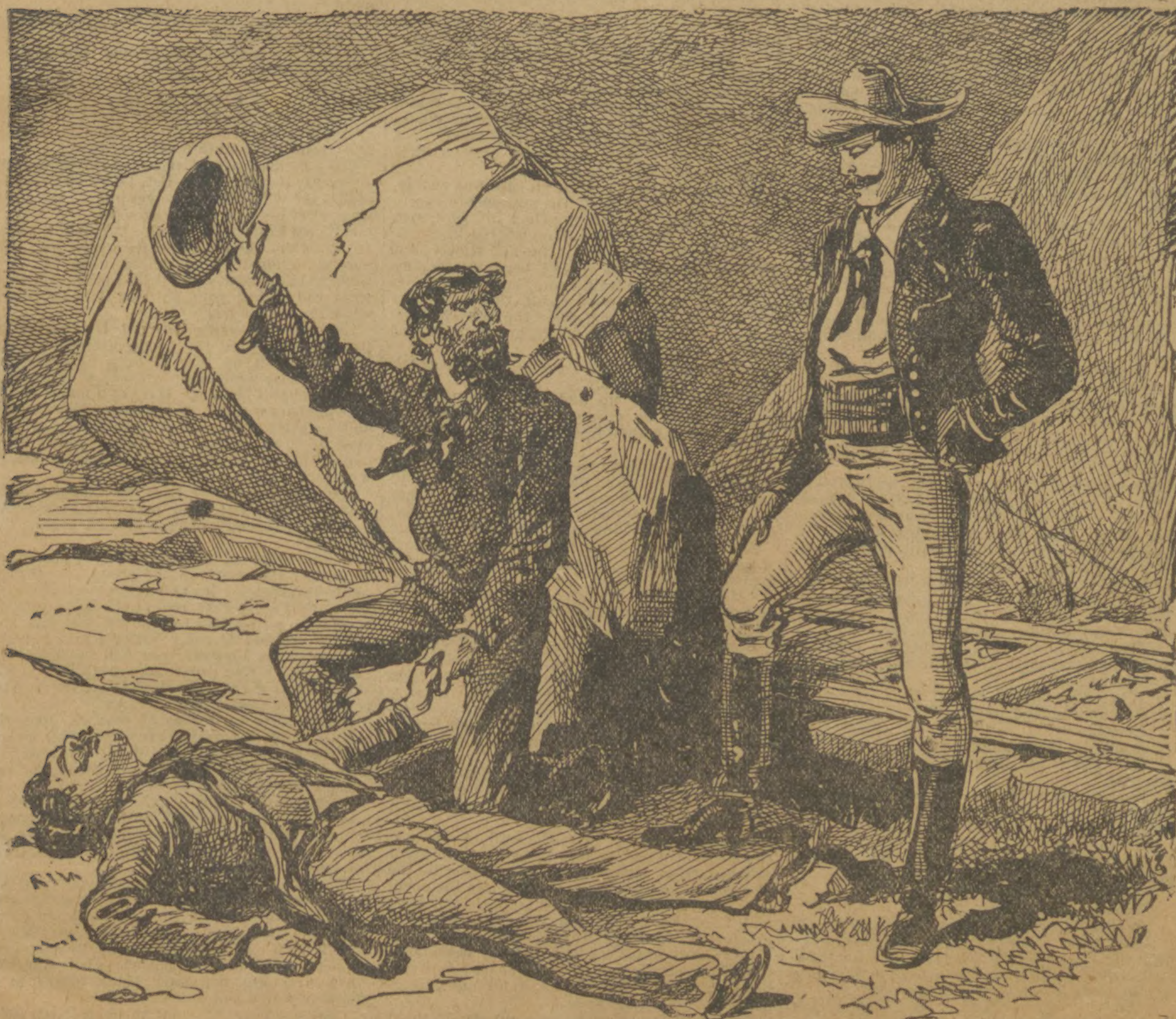
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HERCULES GOLDSPUR, THE MAN OF THE VELVET HAND;

Or, THE POKER QUEEN'S DROP GAME.

BY CAPTAIN HOWARD HOLMES.



"HERE BY MY DEAD PARD AN' IN PRESENCE OV HEAVEN AN' THE LIVIN', I SWEAR TO KEEP MY OATH!" AND COLD-DECK CARL'S TENSELY
DRAWN VISAGE AND FLASHING EYES REVEALED TO GOLDSPUR, THE IMPLACABLE NATURE OF THE STRANGER SPORT.

Hercules Goldspur,

The Man of the Velvet Hand;

OR,

The Poker Queen's Deep Game.

A Romance of Idaho.

BY CAPT. HOWARD HOLMES.

CHAPTER I.

COLD-DECK CARL.

"I'm hyar in person, an' I say it ag'in. She's a daisy! she's a jumper, an' the man what says she isn't's a liar!"

These words fell with emphasis from the lips of a clear-eyed little man, whose shoulders barely rose above the counter of the most pretentious saloon of You-Bet, a wild-cat city in mountainous Idaho, on the line of the newly-established Northern Pacific.

He looked like a dwarf among the dark-shirted, dark faced men by whom he was surrounded. He was not unhandsome, although he had a great scar over his left eye, and his pants thrust loosely into the tops of his boots gave him a certain devil-may-care appearance, which might have commended him to the population of You-Bet.

No one at first responded to the little man's assertion and challenge. The crowd seemed to take for granted his emphatic assertion of the merits of some one, and a number turned away.

"Thar ain't a man in You-Bet who dares to say she isn't a daisy an' a jumper!" he continued, somewhat nettled by the cool reception of his first remarks. "She kin ride; she kin play; she kin shoot. Fer a cool hand at draw, give me Lola."

"Trot'er out, then!" suddenly exclaimed a voice, at the sound of which the little man turned upon the speaker. "I low no man to say thet without producin' his dust. Trot out this queen ov kerd! Whar is she? I'm kind o' handy with the pasteboards myself. Lola ye called'er, I think? Show up, er shut up, ye little runt!"

These words, the last ones especially, had an instant effect. The eyes of the little man fairly flashed. A stride, and then a bound took him to the stranger more than two heads his superior in stature.

"Ar' ye in earnest?" he asked, meeting his gaze with interest.

"I am. My name is Cold-Deck Carl. I'm from Mariposa. Trot out your boss poker queen!"

For a moment the little man did not reply, but during the silence the scar made answer: it suddenly grew livid.

"Cold-Deck Carl, eh?" he repeated. "Wal, ef you want to see Lola, I'll bring her in."

A moment later the figure of the little man disappeared, and a young girl entered the saloon and took an often-occupied station behind the bar.

"Thar she is!—the only gal in You-Bet!" exclaimed a tall, broad-shouldered miner as he leaned over the counter with a smile. "Pigmy Pete never talks about Lola when this daisy is in the room. Step up, gentlemen, an' afore the jumper shows up, we'll drink to the boss female of Idaho!"

The invitation to liquor-up was received with words of approval, more forcible than elegant, and the young girl, who was beautiful, with a pair of shoe-black eyes, rich complexion and a faultless figure, began to set out glasses sufficient for the rough crowd.

"Lola can't be purtier than this daisy," decided Cold-Deck Carl after a moment's inspection of the maid behind the bar. "The only gal in You-Bet didn't some one say?"

"Ther only one, pard," echoed a voice at Carl's elbow, telling him that he had unwittingly spoken aloud.

"Whar did she come from?"

"Hercules fetched'er hyar."

"Hercules?"

"Don't you know him?"

"No. I'm from Mariposa. We don't know him thar."

"Hercules is a dandy. Whar he is, thar's always a boss. We hev'n't see'd'im fer three months. Went South at last accounts."

"South, hey?"

Cold-Deck Carl seemed to take more than a passing interest in the man called Hercules.

"Yes, South," was the reply.

"What's his business?"

"Wait till he comes back an' then ask him."

While these words were not intended to be insulting, it was plainly to be seen that the speaker was quite willing for the man from Mariposa to take them in any humor he pleased.

"Mebbe I will," he said, "an' if I do, I'll get a satisfactory answer, too."

At this juncture the man who had invited the crowd up to drink to the bar-maid's beauty swung his glass above his head, and in tones that sounded beyond the precincts of the drink-

ing place, proposed her health, which was drank while the girl's eyes sought the floor at her feet, and a flush stole across her fair face.

"We'd die fer ye, Zoë," exclaimed the proposer of the toast, bringing his empty glass down upon the counter. "Ther ain't a man in You-Bet to-night, but what would give his veins fer ye. Hyar! look up an' face the crowd," and he leaned over the counter and tapped the girl under the chin with a great bronzed finger.

With another glance at the girl, Cold-Deck Carl left the saloon.

"Hold on thar, Mariposa!" called out one of the miners as he stepped into the soft moonlight that rendered the summer night so beautiful; "Ain't ye goin' ter wait till Pigmy Pete trots Lola out?"

"I'll meet him hyar," he sent back over his shoulder, and then added, through clinched teeth: "I'm hyar fer a purpose, an' more than one man from You-Bet will disskiver it, too."

Without more ado he walked away, nor paused until he stood on the railroad track where it ran through a mountain cut whose walls had an almost sheer ascent of three hundred feet.

The full round moon was directly above this place, and the mellow light bathed it in much beauty.

All at once Cold-Deck Carl put his ear against the rail and listened intently, while he seemed to hold his breath.

"Not yet—not comin' yet!" he murmured. "Mebbe the iron boss ain't due fer some time. I've found one of 'em, an' he mustn't go blunderin' inter You-Bet as thar land lays now. 'Twould spoil all our plans. I haven't lied fer nothin'. I haven't said that I blong ter Mariposa fer fun. No! We are playin' fer big money, just now—fer the biggest pile ever staked in Idaho. Mebbe I'd better go back an' see that daisy jumper Pigmy Pete talks about."

He turned his head toward You-Bet as he finished and was about to return to the place when the sound of an approaching train seemed to strike his ears and he dropped upon the ties again.

"She's comin'!" he exclaimed, his dark but handsome face lighting up with an expression of triumph. "At last! I'm glad I kin say that. At last!"

The rumble of a train was now distinct, and while Carl waited in the moonlight, he drew and looked carefully at a splendid revolver whose silver chasing fairly glistened in his hand.

Then from another pocket he drew a little ball about two inches in diameter.

On the surface of the ball a fuse was visible, and as the headlight of the approaching locomotive became visible he touched this fuse with a match and threw the ball on the track.

For several moments it burned slowly, but all at once little red sparks began to leap up from it, and as the train came thundering down upon it, it exploded with a puff throwing out a glaring red light which filled the cut from the track to the top of the walls, hundreds of feet above.

Cold-Deck Carl stepped coolly from the track and watched the train.

He saw it slow up and then stop with the iron point of the cow-catcher almost onto the burning ball whose light grew stronger as it burned.

He saw, too, the wondering face of the engineer as he leaned from his engine and tried to make out the cause of the weird light; he noticed the passengers who had raised their windows and were looking at the same attraction.

A smile stole over his face, which brightened as he saw a man leap from the train and stop near the track.

"Move on, thar!" he cried to the engineer who had not yet noticed him. "Take yer train on ter You-Bet."

In an instant the engineer's look became a stare.

"Go on! I give you three seconds to open yer throttle," and the silver-mounted revolver covered the engineer's head. "I'm no train-robber. I ask no man ter hold up his hands, but I've stopped yer train fer a purpose all the same. Go on!"

In an instant the face of the engineer disappeared, and the red light still being thrown out by the burning ball revealed the under work of the cars as they passed over it.

Standing erect against the wall of the narrow chasm the man who had proclaimed himself as being from Mariposa looked gigantic in the strange red light, and at sight of him the occupants of the coach drew back from the windows and their hands left the valuables they had grasped on the first glare of the light.

For a minute after the last car passed him Cold-Deck Carl remained where he had stationed himself; then he turned toward the one passenger who had left the train.

Already this individual was advancing upon him, coming down the track with much eagerness depicted on his face, which was darkly handsome, like Carl's, although the heavy mustache that hid his mouth was iron gray.

"Here you are!" he exclaimed, halting before Carl.

"Wal, I should remark to mention," was the response. "That little light o' mine will stop any train. Ef I hadn't stopped you hyar you'd hev gone on ter You-Bet?"

"Yes."

"Wal, we'll go down afoot. It's the better plan. I've found the diamond."

"What?"

"I've found Zoë."

"No."

"By heaven, I hev!" and Carl's hands shut.

His friend gave him an inquisitive look.

"Who fetched her to You-Bet?" he asked.

"Hercules."

"Hercules who?"

"You oughter know. I don't."

The man with the iron-gray mustache was silent.

"I ought to know all my enemies, but I don't know this one," he said. "Hercules? No! I don't know him. But come, I will know him to-night. What! Zoë in You-Bet among the wolves of Idaho? Carl, you've earned all I've agreed to pay you."

"I should remark to mention," smiled Cold-Deck Carl. "If you are ready to go to You-Bet, thither we go."

The two men started down the track, but they had not advanced a rod when the sharp report of a rifle cut the air and Carl's companion reeled away.

"My God! colonel!" ejaculated Cold-Deck Carl, springing after the staggering man whom he did not reach till after he had struck the ground.

Across the track lay the Night Express's late passenger, with Carl bending over him, and gazing into the face upturned to the silver moon that illumined the heavens.

It was a strange scene.

If the marksman had wanted a second victim how easily he could have sent a bullet through Carl's brain; but the man was not molested.

"It's a lie! they haven't killed ye, colonel!" cried Carl. "Say a word an' I'll stay with ye till ye'r on yer feet again. Tell me—"

Cold-Deck Carl paused abruptly then sprung erect.

In an instant he seemed to realize that his companion was dead.

"I'll draw a blood-line around You-Bet for this!" he hissed.

CHAPTER II.

"WHICH ONE SHALL I KILL?"

THE tragedy just recorded occurred about a mile from the mountain railroad town.

For a moment after Carl's mad threat to draw a blood-line around You-Bet, he stood over the dead man with fire in his eyes and all the tigerish part of his wild nature aroused.

"Won't I do it!" he cried. "Won't I go on an' win alone the big game fer which you war playin', colonel? Who killed you? I don't want to know now, but I'll find out! The man what did it has gone to You-Bet, an' thar's whar I'm bound fer."

Instead of moving toward the place, he stooped and lifted the corpse from the track and carried it up the cut until he reached a huge boulder which cast a shadow more than large enough to hide the body of a man.

Depositing it there, he searched the garments and took therefrom everything he could find, even to a small gold toothpick; then, with a parting glance at the dead, he started toward You-Bet.

His destination, of course, was the saloon to which Pigmy Pete had promised to conduct Lola, the girl whose praises he had sounded in loud tones.

A wonderful calmness settled over his face as he neared the place, and he crossed the threshold to be greeted with an exclamation of recognition by Pigmy Pete, and Carl's quick eyes detected the girlish face beyond the little man.

"I've fetched the daisy!" cried Pete, gleefully. "Some ov the boys said you had vamoused ther ranch, but I told 'em thar warn't run in yer eyes. Hyar she is! Trot out byar, Lola. This is Cold-Deck Carl from Mariposa."

Pigmy Pete turned as he finished upon the girl, a sylph-like young creature, who looked like the youthful senoritas of the Mexican borders, for her skin was as dark as theirs, and her eyes as sparkling and keen.

Such a dark-skinned witch had never before crossed the precincts of You-Bet, and although the miners had repeatedly heard Pete sound her praises, they now saw her, with Cold-Deck Carl, for the first time.

If in Pigmy Pete's language she was "a daisy and a jumper," she was also a girl whose eyes spoke indomitable courage, and who knew much about the rough men among whom she stood.

Cold-Deck Carl did not advance to meet Lola at Pete's introduction, but the girl came forward drooping her long black lashes in a courtesy which had much grace.

"She is a beauty," went through Carl's mind as he threw a rapid glance across the counter at Zoë, who stood behind the bar, an interested witness of the proceedings.

He might have wondered if the two girls, se

beautiful yet so different in color, were destined in any way to become rivals.

There was the hot blood of the Southern border in Lola's veins, and the flash of Zoe's dark eyes had already told Carl that, when aroused, she was no mean enemy.

He felt that the two girls had already met, but whether they had vowed to be friends or not, he did not know.

After eying him for a second from beneath her long lashes, Lola looked at Pigmy Pete.

"That's the man who said he was handy with the pasteboards," said Pete, as if in reply to the girl's inquisitive look. "I want you to tackle him, Lola. I lifted my voice in You-Bet an' called yer a daisy an' a jumper. Sustain yer reputation. That's all old Pete 'll ask."

He was not old. One might have found a few silver hairs under the sombrero-like hat, with a wide silver band, that sat rather jauntily on his head, but age had not placed them there.

Pigmy Pete was not well known to the denizens of You-Bet, not well enough, at least, for them to become familiar with the story of those gray hairs, which dated their existence with the scar above his eye from one of the most remarkable events of his life.

"We'll hev thet game," he went on, moving toward one of the many gambling-tables in the room. "Yer name sounds very suggestive, but no cold decks to night. However," and he laughed, "if you kin set one up on Lola hyar, an' win by it, drive ahead, Mr. Mariposa, an' set it up!"

"I'll play the girl a square game," Carl responded.

He moved toward the table, followed by the crowd, to the number of thirty men, on whose hips were seen the deadly weapons of the wild-cat towns of the Far West.

The only person who did not go forward to witness the game was the fair Zoe, the angel of the place—the girl who was understood to be the *protegee* of one Hercules, who had been missing three months from You-Bet.

There was curiosity in her eyes, which still regarded Lola, and she did not see the look which Carl threw toward her.

Lola's eyes beamed suddenly with excitement, and as she seated herself on the bench at the table they fairly danced with delight.

The girl was in her element.

The Spanish-Mexican beauty was really a queen of cards, and the manner in which she took up the pack thrown on the table by Carl and shuffled it elicited much surprise from the crowd, and a proud look from Pigmy Pete.

"Don't play with the Mariposa tiger," whispered Pete to the girl's ear. "I want short work made ov him. Swamp him so quick that his head 'll swim."

Lola's reply was a rapid glance which told Pete that his wishes should be carried out.

"What does the senor stake?" she asked, speaking for the first time in silvery tones as she looked up into Carl's face.

"Mexican! just as I thought," murmured the friend of the man dead in the gulch near town. "I'll bluff Pete's *protegee* in the start."

Then he smiled at Lola. "What do I stake? A few trifles, my little daisy."

That instant his hand disappeared beneath his coat and when it reappeared it was filled with a lot of crisp notes the outer one of which was a five hundred dollar bill.

"How much, senor?" asked Lola not the least disconcerted.

"Nine thousand dollars."

Lola threw a smile at Pigmy Pete, then drew from her bosom a little purse not as large as a mole-skin, but as soft, and laid it alongside of the stake Carl had thrown on the table.

The dead man's friend looked astonished.

"What's in that wallet?" he exclaimed.

"Show up yer pile, miss."

"With pleasure, senor," and picking up the little purse the dark-skinned beauty emptied its contents upon the table.

As these fell out and glistened in the light of the reflector lamp overhead, exclamations of wonder burst from the throats of the crowd.

Each was a shapely diamond!

"What do you value them at?" Carl demanded, in some amazement.

"Forty thousand dollars, senor—no less."

"Jebu! But that's your own valuation."

Lola's reply was the fishing from the depths of the purse of a discolored paper which she undid and laid open for Carl's inspection.

Cold-Deck Carl was convinced at a glance for he saw that Lola's second prize was a certificate of valuation of the diamonds signed by "Craig & Stephens, Jewelers, Virginia City."

"Isn't it squar?" asked Pigmy Pete glancing from the paper into Carl's face.

"h, yes. But," to the girl, "you don't pit them all against my pile?"

"Yes, senor," was the smiling reply. "We'll have no ante, senor. The best hand sweeps the board."

Cold-Deck Carl bit his lip and took up the cards the girl had thrown across his stake.

The crowd drew closer to the table, and from it Carl turned his attention to his "hand."

An expression of chagrin darted athwart his countenance. Although he had played a thou-

sand games and kept his composure, this time he betrayed himself. He had been beaten by men, but by a girl, never!

All at once he threw his cards upon the table with a fierce oath and shot Pigmy Pete a mad look.

"My hand is this, senor," smiled Lola displaying her cards face upward and deftly laying side by side as she did so, four aces. "I do not lose the diamonds, do I, senor?"

"No! but your partner loses his beauty!"

Another instant a human wild-cat cleared the table as if it had been a wisp of straw and landed in front of Pigmy Pete before that individual could realize that he was in the least danger.

Carl's bound took all by surprise.

"I said I would draw a blood-line around You-Bet and I will!" he hissed savagely as his hand closed on Pete's throat, and he lifted him from the floor. "You back the girl! You put her up to beat me. Now, my little snake, I'll make yer eyes burst!"

The crowd drew back, rendered speechless by the sudden assault, and Lola who had been brushed aside by the men of You-Bet was imprisoned between two burly figures while the precious stakes were at the mercy of the first rapacious hand.

It was the most thrilling scene which the gambling-den had witnessed for many nights.

Carl was fast keeping his word. As his bronze hand tightened upon Pete's throat the Pigmy's eyes seemed to start from his head.

Suddenly a man appeared in the open doorway of the den.

A look of recognition lighted up Zoe's eyes as he stepped toward her.

He was a veritable Hercules, and as handsome as he was powerful.

Two long strides carried him to the counter and as he leaned across it, he said:

"Which one shall I kill, Zoe?"

CHAPTER III.

GOLDSBUR'S INTERFERENCE.

THERE was a good-natured twinkle in the eyes of the man as he put the question to the girl behind the bar.

We have already said that he was a giant in stature.

This was true.

Out of his boots he would have measured more than six feet, and his broad shoulders added much to his splendid physique.

His face was handsome, somewhat browned, but full of expression, with almost soft blue eyes, and a silky mustache which hid the contour of his lips.

He wore an open jacket, the edges of which were braided, and at the ends of the sleeves was woven silver braid arranged in loops.

He did not wear the loose almost baggy trousers seen sometimes among men who affect his style of dress; but his nether limbs were clothed in tightly-fitting ones, the ends of which could be seen for the polished boots he wore. At the heel of each boot was a heavy spur the metal of which resembled gold. His hat was a sombrero but soft in texture with the rim above his eyes turned up showing all his face at a glance.

He was still youthful-looking, despite his wild life in more than one lawless locality of the great Northwest, and those whom he made his confidants and they were few in numbers, knew that he had at the date of our romance barely passed his twenty-seventh birthday.

Such was the man who strode into the saloon as Cold-Deck Carl was choking Pigmy Pete black in the face, and coolly asked Zoe which of the two men he should kill.

For a moment the girl made no reply, but as a wild cry rose from Lola's lips, she laid her hand on the giant's arm and clutched it.

"Don't kill the little man, Hercules," she exclaimed. "Don't let the big man kill him."

"I won't, Zoe."

Quick as a flash Hercules wheeled upon the combatants and a bound carried him to the spot they occupied.

Cold-Deck Carl did not seem aware of his presence until a hand large, but soft as velvet, clutched his wrist, and the next moment he was wrenched from his blackened victim with an ease which nearly made him give expression to an exclamation of wonderment.

"You don't choke that infant to death!" said Hercules with a glance at Pigmy Pete who, unable to stand erect after the severe choking he had received, sunk in a heap to the floor.

He still held Carl's wrist and as he eyed him the same faint smile with which he had greeted Zoe was still visible at the corners of his mouth.

"Who are you?" demanded Cold-Deck Carl, with a savageness which told that he was spoiling for a fight.

"Hercules Goldspur!" was the quiet rejoinder. "I never let a big man choke a little one in my presence."

"Oh, you don't!" sneered Carl.

"Never!"

"Then mebbe you have no objection to tackling me? I'm near yer size."

The handsome giant burst into a laugh.

He could look over Carl's head, and Carl was no pigmy.

"We won't fight," he said, releasing Carl's wrist so suddenly that he staggered back. "You've blackened Pigmy Pete's face by a process that's mean and contemptible."

"If you don't like it, say so plainly."

"I do say so. The man who would choke an infant that way is a coward."

"That means me?"

"It was intended for nobody else," was the reply. "Cold-Deck Carl, I believe that's your name, I make no pretensions. These men know me. I'm Hercules Goldspur as I've already told you. I'm all man. There's no half-boss, half-alligator about this chicken. I don't own a foot of land, an' I never expect to. I never staked a claim, an' I'll never be a bonanza king. But thar's one thing I am proud of an' that's this."

Hercules held up his right hand in a manner that riveted Carl's gaze upon it.

The member was shapely, white and fair, and if Cold-Deck Carl had touched it he would have found it as soft as a woman's.

"That hand has given me a name which I never go back on," continued Goldspur addressing Carl. "In different places men know me as The Man of the Velvet Hand."

Carl's start was noticeable. It was apparent that he had heard the name before.

"Are you that man?" he asked.

"I am."

"Then it becomes my duty to kill you."

The crowd drew back at these words, but there was one man who stepped forward and that was Hercules Goldspur.

"Not yet," he said before Cold-Deck Carl could draw his revolver. "When I'm anxious to go to judgment mebbe I'll call on you."

His hand fell on Carl's right arm between elbow and shoulder as he uttered the words, and an instant later by main force he turned him about.

"I want to see you," he said in a significant whisper, and with a look that said still more. "But not here. Come outside."

To the surprise of the crowd, Hercules began to lead Carl toward the open door, and the twain passed from the place more like friends than men who were almost certain to become deadly enemies.

Not a word was spoken until the two men had reached the mouth of the cut in whose shadows lay the man Cold Deck Carl had carried behind the bowlder.

Then Hercules's hand fell from the latter's arm, and looking him in the eye as he stepped back, he said:

"You belong to the family of fools, Cold-Deck Carl."

His words seemed to demoralize the man *not* from Mariposa. His hand made a move toward his revolver, but he checked it himself.

"That's right," laughed Hercules. "Stop your hand half-way an' don't draw my fire. You stopped the train to-night and let a passenger off in this gulch?"

"And you killed him?"

"No," and the face of the speaker instantly became calm. "I have killed no man to-night; but I know where your comrade is. He lies behind a rock not far away. Will you go an' look at him?"

"Yes."

Side by side the two men walked from the spot where they had halted, and Hercules stopped beside a certain bowlder, behind which he looked with his old smile.

"He's hyar yet, Carl," he said, glancing at his companion. "Hadn't you better bury him?"

Cold-Deck Carl's teeth fairly cracked as he answered:

"I want vengeance first."

"Oh, you do? On whom?"

"On the man what killed him! Dare you tell me who did this? Hercules Goldspur, dare you name the man who drove a bullet through this man's brain?"

"An' dare you tell me why he came to You-Bet?" was the quick rejoinder. "Answer me an' I'll answer you. Truth for truth."

The men stood face to face, their feet almost touching the corpse of Cold-Deck Carl's friend.

The moon overhead revealed their stalwart figures and threw their shadows against the bare wall of the cut.

The thrust had been direct, but Carl glanced down at the dead before he answered.

"No, I will not tell you," he said.

"Then find out who killed your friend!"

"I will. Krife an' revolver shall not intimidate Cold-Deck Carl. He war my pardner. He came hyar fer a purpose, Hercules. I stopped the train. My light war a signal which he derstood, but he got off to die hyar with boots on. Thar never died a gamer n'r he. I have said that I will draw a line about You-Bet fer this shot an' I'll draw it. me, dead pard! hear Cold-Deck Carl's ther bullet in yer head!"

Cold-Deck Carl stooped and looked into the face of the dead, and kneeling by the body he put up into Hercules's face.

"I swear to get even," he said, and then he killed my pard. All the wolves ov You-Bet keep my word to draw an' kill an' curse an accursed town. We

colonel an' I war. Our interests war the same, an' in death they shall not be divided. I will win what he started out to win. I will kill the man he wanted to kill. I will reach the end he wanted to reach. I swear it! Here by my dead pard an' in presence ov heaven an' the livin'. I swear to keep my oath!" and Cold-Deck Carl's tensely drawn visage and flashing eyes revealed to Goldspur the implacable nature of the stranger sport.

Carl sprung up as he finished.

"Ye'r bound to keep up my first estimate ov yer," laughed Hercules Goldspur. "Ye'r a full member ov the family ov fools. Go East or West—go ter Frisco or ter Denver; but don't stay hyar and try ter keep that oath. It can't be did."

"I will keep it!"

"Oh, you can't! Look hyar, Carl," and against Carl's arm again fell that soft velvet hand. "I will never ask you again what fetched that dead man ter You-Bet. The man what killed 'im knew, an' that's enough."

"An' you say you didn't?"

"I did not, but if I had seen him in time by heavens I would have dropped him."

"Ab!"

"Why, of course, my dear Cold-Deck," smiled Hercules. "So you won't go back?"

"No. I'm hyar to stay."

"Without a friend?"

"I have friends—the best a man in Idaho can have."

Cold-Deck Carl threw back his coat as he spoke and displayed the butts of two revolvers, which action provoked only a smile from Hercules.

"Then stay," he said; "but let me say that the errand what brought yer dead pard ter You-Bet will never be accomplished by living man. Not while I live an' not while the man who fired to night can shoot. Don't leave You-Bet on Pigmy Pete's account. He'll hurt nobody; but that black-eyed daisy ov his es more dangerous. She'll shoot, but I can't say that ov Pete. They ar' a strange pair an' it's a mystery how they ever got together. When you choked Pete to night you had yer hands at Lola's throat just as much. She'll never forget that. She'll keep your money, too, an' if you tread on her toes again, Carl, she'll take more than your cash."

"My life?"

"Try it an' see."

"Mebbe I will."

"Well, I wouldn't, big as I am," and Goldspur's eyes twinkled merrily as he seemed to increase an inch in stature. "I know these Mexican-blooded women too well for that. Life away up hyar, Carl, don't cool 'em down one bit. So you are bound ter stay?"

"I have told you, yes."

"To do the work that carkiss came ter do?"

"Yes."

"Then, good-night."

Hercules Goldspur stepped back, followed by the eyes of Cold-Deck Carl till he reached the railroad track.

"Go back to You-Bet, Goldspur, an' proclaim to the hull population thar that I'm hyar fer a purpose, an' that I'm goin' ter win! I'll draw that blood-line I've spoken about—by Heaven! I will. No livin' bein' shall balk me. A thousand Mexican women sha'n't turn me back. All the nooses an' revolvers in Idaho have no terrors for me. I was bound to this dead man with an awful oath. I don't care if the man who killed him hears me now. I hope he does. I'm a tiger an' a devil, an' the man what crosses my path dies! I don't care if Hercules Goldspur is interested in my comin' to You-Bet."

"Wal he is," came in stern tones from the lips of the giant who had halted on the track.

"We understand each other, then," said Cold-Deck Carl.

CHAPTER IV.

THE KICKER FROM SILVER BOW.

THE mining-town of You Bet was known for its rough citizens who had founded it before the coming of the Northern Pacific.

The mines in its vicinity were very productive, and marvelous stories of their wealth had gone abroad to bring back a harvest in the shape of speculators, silver sharps, desperadoes and men of all classes except the honest, fair-dealing kind.

It boasted of a population of several hundred souls, all men, save the black-eyed creature already seen behind the bar of the most prominent gambling-house in You-Bet. Zoe, the girl known to be under Hercules Goldspur's protection, was the only woman in town.

go back to her.

Pete had scarcely touched the floor when he was from Carl's unmerciful choking, the Mexican girl, was at his side with a look of fear, and while the unsymmetrical drew back and left her, Zoe, who had been behind the counter and glided to her

"What killed him?" she said,

"I met in Senor Pete's office," she replied while the eyes of

the speaker fairly glistened. "I will make him remember his work. He shall feel the vengeance of Lola."

"Of course. But your diamonds?"

The Mexican girl sprung up and rushed to the table.

Not a diamond had been disturbed, but all lay where she had left them glittering among the notes Cold-Deck Carl had thrown down as his stake.

Coolly transferring notes and diamonds to her pockets, Lola came back to Pigmy Pete and had the satisfaction of seeing him open his eyes and put his hand to his throat as if to satisfy himself that it was all there.

"Where is he?" he asked hoarsely, as his eyes searched the room for the man who had administered the severe choking.

"Gone," said Lola.

"Gone where?"

"Away."

"He will come back?"

"I hope so."

"He will—he must! I'm little, but I'm a tiger, Lola. Ah! you know that. Who raked in the pot?"

"I did."

"Good!"

With difficulty Pigmy Pete got upon his feet and walked straight to the bar where a man waited to set out whatever he ordered.

"Four fingers ov lightning," he exclaimed in answer to the questioning look. "Cold-Deck stopped the circulation of my blood with his infernal fingers. He dammed up the red tide, but I'll start it ag'in. Thar's comin' a day ov settlement!" And the glass which Pigmy Pete emptied at the conclusion of the last sentence came down upon the counter with an emphasis not to be mistaken.

"He seems to be a jumper," remarked the bartender.

"I'll jump 'im!" was the flashing retort. "Thar's only one real jumper in Idaho an' yonder she stands. Thar's the boss gal ov the Northwest. She kin out-shoot any man, white er yaller, what ever clutched a dropper. Come hyar, Lola."

At sound of her name, the dark-skinned beauty advanced toward Pete who eyed her proudly as she came up.

"I war just tellin' 'em that you war ther boss shot ov the Northwest," he went on. "I'm little but I never lie. Give 'em a sample ov your skill."

"With the revolver?" asked Lola.

"Yes; ye're queen on that."

Pigmy Pete and his dark-eyed protegee were of course the observed of all observers in the bar-room, and Lola's eyes glistened as she advanced to the center of the room with a silver-mounted revolver in her right hand.

Something glittered in her left, something that possessed a clear, metallic ring, and all at once she sent a silver dollar spinning toward the ceiling.

Following it with her eye, she waited till it touched the roof, then, elevating the revolver, she fired, catching the coin in its descent and knocking it far from its course.

A murmur of applause rose from the lips of the spectators and brightened Pigmy Pete's eyes.

Again and again Lola sent coins toward the roof of the den, always hitting them just as they turned to descend.

Sometimes she would have two in the air at once, but she never failed to send them flying from their course.

"Now the dollar act," said Pete, taking a silver dollar from his pocket and putting it between his teeth so that one-half of it projected from his mouth.

Then he strode across the floor to the further end of the room, and at a distance of sixty feet turned one side of his face toward Lola.

Quick as a flash up went the girl's revolver, and without seeming to take aim in the least, she touched the trigger and sent the coin jingling from his mouth!

"She's a daisy an' a jumper, I tell ye!" ejaculated Pete, wheeling proudly upon the rough spectators. "If you've got a match fer her, trot 'er out. Lola an' me ain't exactly on a starrin' tower, but we're willin' ter exhibit afore any audience. I'm part wild-cat, an' she's all business. She hasn't done half what she kin do with the dropper. Whar did I pick 'er up? Wal, I guess not—not ter-night, gentlemen." And Pete showed his teeth in a grin that seemed to delight him.

A moment later he stood at the girl's side, and, before one member of the crowd could address him, he was leading her toward the door.

"Hold on thar!" cried a voice that startled every one, and at that moment a droll-looking man stepped into the den. "Take one with me at my expense, rattlers. I allus treat first when I strike a new town, an' tharfore it's my treat to-night."

Every eye was turned upon the speaker.

He was a heavy-set man not above five feet six in stature, about forty years old, and with eyes full of humor, and with a good-natured, jolly face.

His garments fitted him loosely, almost baggi-

ly, as if to admit of the expansion of his body whenever he laughed.

"Nominate yer p'isen an' take one with the Happy Rattler ov Silver Bow," he continued. "I'm no lookin'-glass an' if I war you fellers would see some infernal homely picters. I allus set 'em up first in a new town. It's my style. Durn the expense, my blushin' kyotes. Ef I don't look like a bonanza king I'll fetch in my security who kin kick his way through creation in a jiffy. Hol ye that ar' dry, ter quote the only scripiter I ever caught onter. Walk up an' drink with the Happy Rattler ov Silver Bow!"

His manner and looks had amused the crowd from the first, and when he finished, with one exception, and that one was Lola the Mexican girl, they stood along the counter ready to do justice to the invitation just extended.

Zoe, who was about to quit the room when the man from Silver Bow entered, stopped and fixed her eyes upon him.

"I wonder who he is?" she said. "Hercules has told me that strange men might be seen in You-Bet before the summer closed, and I begin to think that he knew what he was talking about. There have been strange men here to-night—Cold-Deck Carl, and Pigmy Pete, though he is not so very strange, and now this man comes."

The Happy Rattler did not seem to take much notice of Zoe, although she eyed him with increasing interest, for while his face was not very attractive, there was something in his expression that demanded more than a casual glance.

"Now, my saintly rattlers, I'll call in my pard," he suddenly exclaimed. "He never drinks, but he's got a habit which will go with him to the grave. He's also a native ov Silver Bow, to ther manner born, an' the highest kicker now on exhibition. I'll call 'im in."

Stepping toward the open door, the Happy Rattler of Silver Bow called "George" several times, the last call producing an answer in a pair of tremendously long ears that appeared at the threshold.

"The loss elevator ov the United States, angels ov You-Bet!" said the Happy Rattler. "He isn't clothed in scarlet an' fine linen, ner as ther lilies ov ther valley; but he sustains his reputation as the da'siest elevator ov the kentry. Waltz in ter victory, George," and in came a small but strong-limbed donkey, whose eyes seemed to share the merry twinkle that lighted up the depths of his master's.

"What's yer counter worth, my gentle shepherd?" asked the Happy Rattler, leaning over the rough wooden bar and addressing the dispenser of drinks behind it.

"I don't want to sell," was the reply.

"Oh, you don't?" with a look of well-feigned disappointment. "I'll give you twenty."

"No."

"Fifty."

"No."

"Then I'll split the difference which is the counter. Come up ter work, George."

The donkey advanced straight toward the Happy Rattler, and at a wave of his hand turned his heels toward the bar.

"You won't sell, eh?" he asked the bartender.

"No! an' if you let that kickin' machine ov yours—"

"The reputation ov Silver Bow must an' shall be sustained," was the interruption. Now, my dynamite seraph, proceed ter business!"

The next instant the work began.

The donkey's heels thundered against the bar with a force that was perfectly irresistible, and the boards flew in every direction.

The animal seemed to relish the sport for at times he appeared to stand on his lengthy ears while he elevated his heels above the head of the astonished man who kept his station behind the bar despite the flying splinters and demolished framework.

The counter was a pine affair, roughly built, and just dry enough to yield readily to the assaults of Kicking George.

It was an exciting scene and one that had its funny side.

The crowd, astonished at first, laughed, and then roared.

The whole interior of the saloon was in a hilarious uproar in the midst of which the only displeased spectator was the man on whom the loss fell.

Kicking George stopped when there was nothing left to conquer.

He had kicked the bar into kindling wood and demolished numerous jugs that had been placed under it for want of room on the shelves.

"Thar, my gentle elevator," said the Happy Rattler; "We've split the difference with my blushin' dispenser of Idaho p'isen—split it inter kindlin'. Nobly have you sustained the reputation ov Silver Bow. You've no more world's ter conquer."

"But I have!" grated the bartender striding toward the Rattler over the ruins of his counter.

There was a cocked revolver in his hand.

"Not yet, fairy ov the blazin' orbs!" said

the man from Silver Bow, and his hand closed suddenly on the liquor-dealer's wrist. "Things hev reached a sweet pass when two citizens ov Silver Bow can't have a little amusement. Estimate yer damages an' present yer bill. Draw on ther bank liberally. I'd die ef George couldn't demolish suthin' twice a week."

"Settle with 'im, Joe!" cried the crowd. "Draw on the bank an' we'll treat the house." The ire of the bartender suddenly cooled.

"Called it a hundred," he said. "Thar it is!" and several bills fell into his hands. "It's ther cheapest kickin' matinee George has had fer a month. Waltz up an' select yer ratsbane, my bloomin' sunflowers," to the crowd. "It's George's treat."

Again the crowd surged forward and drank, this time to the health of the cause of the ruin by which they were surrounded.

"Thar's a daisy blossom!" suddenly exclaimed the Happy Rattler, springing to Zoe's side, and a moment later he was saying in rapid tones at her ear:

"You ar' Ferd Sutter's girl, an' worth a cool million. Don't you know it? I used ter court yer mother—I, the Happy Rattler ov Silver Bow. They've been huntin' you fer years, an' men hev got ter die fer ye right hyar in You-Bet. One man died already to-night. What do they call you here?"

"Zoe," said the astonished girl. "Zoe! It's a pretty name. It ought ter be Zoe the Bonanza Queen. You ar' goin' ter be the first character ov a wild, bloody drama. I guess George an' I will stay an' help 'em play it out."

And while the Happy Rattler laughed Zoe broke from his grasp, and fled from the room.

CHAPTER V.

THE VELVET HAND AND ZOE.

THE young girl did not pause until she found herself beneath the brilliant stars that studded the vault of night.

"He calls himself the Happy Rattler from Silver Bow—but that name is only a disguise," she said to herself. "I never saw him before that I know of, but he knew me at sight, and that proves that he is a different person from the one whom he calls the Happy Rattler. Where is Hercules? Oh, that he were here now!"

"I am here, Zoe." At that moment a man stepped to her side, and the young girl looked up into the giant's face.

"You are here, Hercules; thank Heaven!" exclaimed Zoe, as she nestled close to the strong arms of Goldspur. "I have been frightened, frightened almost out of my wits."

"By whom, my pet?" asked Hercules with a smile. "Who has dared to scare you? Snow me the low dog—"

"You will meet him soon enough—I know you will," interrupted the girl. "Some strange events have occurred at the saloon since you left it with the man called Cold-Deck Carl. It has been invaded by a man and his donkey and the donkey kicked the bar to pieces."

"Is that fellow here?" asked Hercules. "He always turns up when I have some important transaction on my hands. Hails from Silver Bow, Zoe; doesn't he?"

"So he says." "And calls his livin' kickin' apparatus George?"

"Yes." "As a kickin' machine that donkey has no rival," laughed Hercules. "I saw him back up to a camp-fire ov Sioux an' his heels kicked 'em in forty directions. So he is here. Where is he, Zoe?"

"I left him in the place." "With everything within reach of the donkey's heels kicked into splinters?"

"Pretty much."

"But you say he frightened you."

"He did—with what he said."

"Wal, what wor that?"

"He called me the child of Ferd Sutter—"

"Which you ar'."

"And said that I would become the central figure in a bloody drama—"

"I guess that's about right, Zoe," interrupted Hercules Goldspur with a coolness that startled the girl.

"Then, for Heaven's sake let us get away from here!" she cried. "If that man is a prophet, do not let me see the light of another day in You-Bet. I don't want a drop of blood spilled for me. Take me back to the old ranch which I have not seen for many years. If my father is living, let me see him again."

A strange light beamed in Hercules Goldspur's eyes.

"It can't be, Zoe," he said with determination, looking down into her black orbs which like her words were a prayer. "There can be no reconciliation yet. I would not cause you pain—not for all the ore in these hills. But what you seek cannot be granted. You are Ferdinand Sutter's child and heiress. Where he lives you would be a bonanza queen; but you can't go back yet."

"Why not?"

"Because certain men know that you are here."

"Ah!" Zoe seemed to shrink from Goldspur as she uttered the brief exclamation.

"Because Cold Deck Carl is here," Hercules went on with a moment's pause; "because there's a dead man in the deep cut to-night—"

"A dead man?"

"A dead man!"

"Who killed him?"

"Ah! not now," and the arm of Hercules Goldspur stole around the girl's pliant waist.

"That is one of the things you must not know for the present, Zoe."

"That man was killed because I am here," she exclaimed.

Goldspur smiled.

"Listen to me, Zoe. The last train that passed You-Bet to-night was stopped by a signal-light in the gulch, and a passenger who had been telegraphed for five days ago got off an' joined the chap what waited for him. They war workin' together. Wal, while they war holdin' their confab on ther track a bullet happened along that way an' the passenger died with his boots on. He war shot squar' between the eyes an' not in the back of the head fer the man what teched the trigger shoots his enemies in the face. The man what warn't shot war Cold-Deck Carl; the other—not now, Zoe, not now. There! don't tease Hercules fer his name fer you'll not hear it to-night."

"I will not ask again," said Zoe, beating down her curiosity. "My God! can it be that men are to fight like wolves for me, and like wolves die for a foolish girl? Tell me this shall not be, Hercules. You can prevent it all; I know you can. There is a trail that leads to my father's ranch. It leads from this mountain town where men fight over an ounce of silver, and quarrel over the homeliest Indian girl that strays into camp."

"Don't play the infant game, Zoe!" ejaculated Hercules. "Ain't this arm strong enough to protect you? When did you discover that Gold-pur is a boy with neither muscle nor brains?"

His look abashed the girl. The hot blood flowed to her temples and crimsoned them as she laid her hand on his arm.

"Forgive me, Hercules," she cried. "I have never doubted your ability to protect me. But what is this red drama of which I am to be the central figure? Dare you let me into the secret? What if I should go to the Happy Rattler and ask him?"

"The fool would be likely to tell you," answered Hercules. "But come with me, girl. I will not keep everything from you any longer."

Overjoyed, Zoe permitted the handsome giant to lead her from the spot and toward the several mines that lay at the northern side of the town.

No sounds but those of their own steps greeted their ears as they advanced, and Hercules who guided Zoe did not pause until they reached an opening in a hill.

"We'll go in," he said, with a smile, noticing how suddenly Zoe had halted in front of the aperture. "Thar is the blackness ov darkness in the old mine; but the air is fresh and I've got matches."

Zoe looked up into his face, and, as if reassured by a glance at his stalwart physique, went forward without hesitation, and the twain quickly disappeared.

Twenty minutes later the glare of a little match dissipated some of the gloom of a cavern, and then its light was communicated to a more pretentious stick, one end of which Hercules thrust into a crack in the wall.

"Now, Zoe, you will see something I have preserved a long time," he said, taking from a natural stone shelf a little iron box which he opened and took therefrom a piece of rough yellowish paper.

"I'll read it for you—every sentence, every word," he continued as the girl's eagerness drew her closer to him. "Here we go."

"STOLEN BY APACHES!

"FIVE THOUSAND DOLLARS REWARD.

"Know all men that on the 23d day of May, 186-, my daughter Zoeta was carried off by a band of Apaches under the leadership of Chief Grass Snake. In order to stimulate search for her, while I shall use all efforts possible for her recovery myself, I offer a reward of five thousand dollars in gold for her return, and the same sum in the same metal for the scalp of the Apache chief. I will treat with no Apache Indian for Zoeta's return, for I despise everything Indian; but I will have vengeance for the infamous deed that has deprived me of a beloved daughter.

"(Signed)

"FERDINAND SUTTER."

"There was a time men tell me, Zoe, when Arizona was flooded with posters like these," said Hercules when he had finished reading the document. "Men found them everywhere, on trees, rocks, and even in the depths of caves like this. Wherever man went he was certain to behold one of Ferdinand Sutter's papers. They did some good. The best men of Arizona hunted for the lost girl. They never spared an Indian whom they met an' the Apaches were obliged to make themselves scarce for a while. But they never found the girl."

"No, because I am shet!" cried Zoe. "My name has been shortened; why I do not know. Is the offer of reward still good?"

"Yes."

"Why do you not claim it?"

Hercules Goldspur laughed.

"Why, I might lose you, my bird!" he exclaimed. "I might lose my little Zoe, the pearl of the mountains."

The girl drew back from him.

"Then you prefer to see my father suffer," she said. "Then, Hercules, you want me to become the central figure of the bloody drama of which the Happy Rattler spoke. Then—"

"Hush!" interrupted Hercules springing to the girl's side and seizing her wrist as he gazed down into her eyes. "You have said enough. I am truly The Man of the Velvet Hand. There are near me foes who shall learn that I have a right to that title. Let the play begin. It has begun. It began to-night in the cut, an' one man lies dead before the curtain has fallen on the first act. You know who you are—Ferdinand Sutter's child; an' he a millionaire. But that paper is a lie, Zoe. It does not set forth the truth. It says that you were stolen by Apaches, but you were not."

"Then, by whom?"

"By white men."

"My father's enemies?"

"Yes."

"Did no Indians help at all?"

"They were side actors, in the pay of the man who planned the theft. They misled your father an' his friends. If all the Apaches had been hunted down then, you would not have been found."

"I know nothing about my abduction," said Zoe.

"Of course not. You were taken from the cradle."

"My mother—"

"Had been dead three months."

The girl was silent for a moment.

"It is a wild romance. Will it never end?" she suddenly ejaculated.

"All things end," smiled Hercules.

"Men will will fight for me, you say; but they shall not do it! I will not play in the red drama The Man from Silver Bow talks about. For the last time, Hercules, take me back to the old man who waits for his child."

It was a plea spoken in tones that would have made an impression on a heart of stone.

If it moved the handsome giant, he did not give way to his feelings.

Quick as a flash, he stooped and kissed the girl and then burst into a laugh.

"Give you up, my Northwest angel?—not yet!" he cried. "I've gone through too much for you. Let them gather at You-Bet for the prize that is here. Let the man I met to-night draw his boasted blood-line around the town if he will; let Lola shoot an' the Rattler laugh; let the other man kill an' the red devils come. I am ready for all, Zoe. They don't separate us till I am ready for it. I am The Man of the Velvet Hand!"

CHAPTER VI.

THE DOOM OF THE PARDS.

"THIS gentlemen, is the only original Kickin' George ov Silver Bow," said the Happy Rattler as he leaned against his donkey and removed from between his teeth a cigar with which he had regaled himself as he surveyed the crowd who had witnessed the animal's late exploits.

"He's gentle, but not handsome; kind, but not very grateful. Ingratitude is his only fault. Give 'im a squar' meal to-day an' to-morrow if he gets a chance he'll kick your head off. We'll liquor up again among the ruins of Joe's bar and then me an' my pard will travel on, Waltz up, my sweet-scented shrubs ov the mountains, and draw yer subsistence."

Once more, as before, the tongs of You-Bet did not hesitate to accept the Rattler's invitation, and when the glasses had been emptied, he led the wonderful donkey from the place.

"I knowed the girl the moment I sot eyes on her," he ejaculated to himself when he found himself beyond the precincts of the den.

"She's got her father's eye an' disposition, an' would make a boss bonanza queen. Kind o' surprised her when I told her who she war. She wasn't lookin' fer a revelation ov that kind, and mine war in the nature of a thunderbolt from a cl'ar sky. What am I goin' ter make out ov this expedition? How much, George? In the first place, thar's the old Injun reward ov five thousand. That war doubled some years ago. It's ten now with interest. By Jehu! it's a bonanza fer this angelic being. Then while I'm in this kentry I might strike a yieldin' claim, who knows?"

Talking thus aloud and in a strain full of glee as he led the donkey toward the northern confines of the town, the Happy Rattler was building in the air castles which were liable to be knocked to pieces.

He had struck a trail for which he had hunted a long time.

His donkey had not kicked counters to pieces for nothing, for his last exploit in that line had brought to light the long-lost heir of the gigan-

tic Arizona ranch in the person of Zoe, the protégée of The Man of the Velvet Hand.

To restore the girl to her father, to snatch her, if need be, from the power of Hercules Goldspur was the aim of his ambition, and while he counted the perils that faced him, the old time twinkle left his eyes and a serious expression came to his face.

"We'll pull through, George," he resumed, striking the donkey with his fat hand. "My long-eared cherub, we'll rake in the stakes and leave You-Bet with flying colors."

"If I say so."

At the sound of that voice the Happy Rattler and his pard both stopped.

"Great Jehosaphat!" fell from the Rattler's lips as he caught sight of the man who seemed to have risen from the earth ahead of him.

"Whar did you rise from?"

The answer was a low, cutting laugh.

"From the ground, mebbe. Mr. Rattler, will yer please repeat yer words?"

"About—"

"Yes, about that good-sized reward. Mebbe you'll get it, an' mebbe not. Now, chaw yer words over, an' spit 'em out."

For a moment the jolly man from Silver Bow remained as silent as a statue; but he craned his neck forward to get a good look at the man who had confronted him.

He saw a well-built personage, with determined face and a pair of wonderfully cool eyes; a man his superior in stature, if not in strength, and one who held an advantage over him inasmuch as his confronter held a revolver.

"I war just talkin' ter George hyar about a legacy we'd get one o' these days from our aunt in 'Frisco," said the Happy Rattler, with unblushing effrontery. "It's only a small pile, but big enough to open a game o' draw, eh, George, my honeysuckle?"

The man with the revolver appeared to smile. The falsehood had not deceived him.

"You're a cute one, Rattler," he said. "You must be president ov a liars' club somewhar. Does yer pard possess the same faculty?"

"Pretty much, thank 'ee."

"Then ye'r a delicious pair an' no mistake. Comin' from yer aunt in 'Frisco, eh?"

"Yes."

"A small pile?"

"Small but comfortable; big enough for George an' me."

This was too much.

The man who heard these words burst into a laugh.

"Slicker than an eel, by jingo!" he exclaimed. "The Happy Rattler from Silver Bow is the champion liar ov the Northwest. You can't pull the wool over my eyes, old fellow. That aunt game is all sham. You've told it so often in different parts of the kentry, that you've begun ter believe it yerself. It won't do in You-Bet. After this don't talk so loud ter Kickin' George when you unfold your plans. Goin' ter restore the girl to her father an' rake in the reward! Warn't that about the size ov it, Rattler?"

"Never. Restore the girl? What girl?"

"Fool! I'm not goin' ter waste words. I'm Cold Deck Carl, an' I fool with no man. I'm hyar fer a purpose, an' that purpose is to rake in more than the ranch owner's reward. It wouldn't last me one night, especially when I have such opponents as Pigny Pete's black-eyed daisy. Ever hear ov me?"

"Frequently," said the Rattler. "Did you ever see George kick?"

"No, an' I never expect to."

"Never?"

"Never!"

"I don't know about that."

"I do. Move along straight ahead."

The Happy Rattler gave Cold-Deck Carl a searching look, but hesitated.

"I'm in earnest," he said. "I have sworn to draw a blood-line about this infernal town an' I'm ready to begin with you, although 'twould be a pity ter deprive Silver Bow ov such a prominent citizen. March on! If you move a foot either way from the trail I'll leave George ter kick his way through the world alone."

"That'd be darned ungentlemanly," remarked the Rattler. "I guess I'll move on."

There was no reply except the menace of the revolver in Cold-Deck Carl's hand, and the man and his donkey began to move on.

The trail was narrow and led toward the mines, but the many brilliant stars, and the moon that rode the heavens, showed it to man and mule.

Cold Deck Carl followed, with his eyes fixed on the Happy Rattler.

There was triumph in them, the triumph of the desperado who rejects no means that promise to gain certain ends.

A short distance from the place where he had been halted by Cold-Deck Carl, the Rattler came to a halt, and then suddenly drew back.

"Thar's a hole in the ground hyar," he said.

"Jump it," said Carl, sarcastically.

"I can't. It's a hundred feet wide."

The eyes of Cold-Deck Carl fairly glistened.

"Go on, then!" he said.

"Inter ther hole? Cold Deck, I'm no fool."

"Hol hol! You can't jump tae'r hole, you say?"

"I can't."

"Try it."

"I won't. It's ther mouth ov a mine an' Heaven knows how deep it is."

"Wal, deep er shallow, you're goin' ter find ther bottom."

"George an' me?"

"Both ov ye. United in life, not severed in death, eh, Rattler?"

The last word was followed by a cutting laugh which seemed to find an echo in the depths of the old mine, on whose brink the two pards stood.

"I am goin' to reach my goal ef I reach it alone, riddled an' cut," continued Cold-Deck Carl.

"You're one ov ther obstructions, Rattler, an' ez such must get out o' ther way. Jump!"

The sudden command startled the Happy Rattler.

He looked from Carl into the black abyss that yawned at his feet.

There was death at the bottom of the old shaft—death, and the loss of the reward he coveted.

No wonder that he shrunk from the leap into the unknown.

Cold-Deck Carl was not going to give his victim any time for preparation.

His last command was quickly followed by another.

"Mount that mule!"

"It's a good idea," murmured the Rattler.

"It's my only hope fer life. George, I guess our kickin' days have ended." And he threw himself sullenly upon the donkey's back.

"Now, my angel from Silver Bow, inspect the mine. Mebbe you'll strike a bonanza down thar—a bigger one than you war goin' to get from that moonshine aunt in 'Frisco. No more talkin' now. Jump!"

The speaker took a step nearer his victims, but took good care to keep out of reach of Kickin' George's hoofs.

The revolver crept forward till it seemed to touch the Happy Rattler's face.

There was an unsparing finger at the trigger.

"Wal, jump it is," grated the Rattler wheeling upon Cold-Deck Carl and clinching his hand as he shook it in his face. "Durn my pooter! ef George an' me ever come up from this blackness ov darkness thar'll take place ther all-fired kickin' spree ever seen in Idaho! It won't be counters an' jugs then, but 'twill be ther anatomy of that mean skunk what calls himself Cold-Deck Carl. Come, George. Truth crushed ter earth will rise ag'in, an' I'm truth, by Jehosaphat!"

"Jump! an' be quick about it!"

The next moment a pair of spurs touched the flanks of the donkey, and in the twinkling of an eye the two pards from Silver Bow disappeared from sight.

It was an awful leap!

Two strides carried Cold-Deck Carl to the edge of the shaft, and leaning over it he listened intently for some moments.

Not a sound came up from the darkness which no human eye could penetrate, and at the end of five minutes he rose and put up his revolver.

"One," he said significantly. "One meddler out ov the way, an' he promised to be a troublesome one, too. Whar an' ye, Rattler, an' when an' whar will yer pard kick ag'in?"

With a light laugh Cold-Deck Carl turned away and left his victims to their fate.

He looked like a man who was bound to keep his oath to draw a blood-line about You Bet.

He had already begun his work.

He went straight toward the saloon where Kickin' George had performed his last exploit.

The door stood open, but the denizens of the trap were not to be seen.

The only person visible was Joe, who was gathering up the remains of his bar with a dolorous look, as if he thought of the labor that would be required to produce a new one.

Cold-Deck Carl surveyed this scene for a moment, and then stepped inside.

Joe's first knowledge of his presence was conveyed by the hand that dropped upon his shoulder.

"You back?" he exclaimed, recognizing Cold-Deck Carl as he sprung up. "Whar an' the Happy Rattler an' that boss kicker ov his'n?"

"Where they'll never demolish another bar. Joe, I'll take a whisky flush. I feel like a mornin' star." And the speaker patted Joe's shoulder and laughed again.

CHAPTER VII.

SILKEN FINGERS.

THE drink which Cold Deck Carl poured out among the ruins of Joe's bar was tossed off with the gusto of a well pleased desperado, and a minute later the bartender found himself alone again.

Cold-Deck Carl walked away, and was soon lost among the mines.

Half an hour afterward he reappeared, bearing in his arms the body of a man whose face was white and whose eyes stared blankly at the stars overhead.

The man killed in the gulch!

He carried the corpse away and halted halfway up a little hill well covered with furze and with narrow paths running hither and thither like the trails of rabbits.

"I'll plant him hyar," he said, depositing the body on the ground. "He war my pard, an' I sent fer him ter come hyar ter die; but I didn't know it."

Without another word he fell to the labor of making a grave for the dead, and this he accomplished with the assistance of a pick which he had brought from the mines.

Nobody heard the sounds of the implement as it dug the last resting-place for Cold-Deck Carl's pard, and the little clods that rolled down the hill did nothing more than slightly shake the bushes through which they passed.

It was a wild and lonely burial, one that attested the faithfulness of man, rough and hardened though he was, to a companion who had possessed not a single good trait of character.

When Carl turned to the corpse and lifted it to transfer it to the hollow his pick had formed, the coat opened and he saw—what?—a paper fastened to it on the inside, a paper covered with writing.

"Somebody's been with the colonel since I left him!" he ejaculated, and tearing the paper off he held it up in the moonlight and tried to decipher the inscription.

"Cold-Deck Carl," he read aloud. "When you have planted the colonel I beg you to turn your attention to me, for You-Bet is too little to hold both of us since I know what brought you here. Draw your blood-line about this town an' start in with me ef you want to. You can't have the prize what brought you to You-Bet. I'm her protector, an' by the eternal stars! thar's not men ner wolves enough in Idaho to loosen my grip."

HERCULES GOLDSBUR.

The Man of the Velvet Hand.

After reading the paper Cold-Deck Carl glanced over it again and then smiled derisively.

"Ther Man ov ther Velvet Hand, eh?" he exclaimed. "You-Bet too small fer both ov us! That's a hard cold fact. Zoe's ther prize we're playin' fer, Goldspur. I'm glad you announce yerself her protector, fer I know just who I've got to meet. You say you didn't kill the colonel. I doubt it. I'm inclined ter believe you a liar. Ef you didn't, who did? Not the Rattler, not Pigmy Pete. Who else is hyar to do it? Let the man who wiped the colonel out step forward ef he hears me. Let the sneaking coward show himself ef he dares!"

There was no reply, and thrusting the paper into an inner pocket Cold-Deck Carl proceeded to inter his comrade.

He was not disturbed at his labor, and when he went down the hill, having flung the pick among the bushes, a few fresh clods told where slept the man who had come to You-Bet with a scheme which he would never accomplish.

"I'd like to meet him," grated Carl through clinched teeth, "but most ov all I'd like to find the girl just now. She stays about Joe's. I think, but the events that happened thar to-night may have frightened her off."

He went back to the saloon, but his inspection of its interior failed to find Zoe.

Joe's customers, many of them at least, had come back and money was being lost and won over the various tables that were scattered about the den.

"She isn't thar, so I'll have ter look fer her elsewhar," he said turning from the door from which he had taken an observation.

He turned back somewhat disappointed.

"Whar will I look fer her?" he ejaculated. "It isn't necessary that I should find her to-night, but, then, I'd like to."

The last word had scarcely left Carl's lips ere a man emerged from a cabin hardly twenty yards away.

"The very man I want," exclaimed Carl. "I'll shoot his manifesto through his head! By heavens! they've raised a devil in You-Bet."

The man who had stepped into the starlight had a magnificent physique, and was in every respect a giant, standing easily on the ground, and looked grand with his wealth of black hair that brushed his shoulders, and with the broad-rimmed hat which was elevated just enough to show his lofty forehead.

It was The Man of the Velvet Hand!

How Cold-Deck Carl's eyes flashed as they watched him!

"My victim," passed his lips in a hiss. "Yes, You-Bet is too small for both of us, Hercules. We both want the same gold-mine, an' but one can win. That one shall be Cold-Deck Carl!"

He had drawn his revolver, and now he took from his pocket the paper he had found pinned to the dead colonel's coat.

Rolling it up in his left hand, he thrust it into the barrel of the weapon, but left one end protruding from the muzzle.

Not for a moment had he taken his eyes off his enemy, who, standing near the cabin whose threshold he had just crossed, appeared to be waiting for some one.

Suddenly, however, Hercules Goldspur took a piece of paper from his pocket and stepped toward the hut.

"Another manifesto," said Carl under his breath as he watched these proceedings. "He

needn't trouble himself about it, for he's about ter get the first one back."

By this time Goldspur had placed the paper against the door of the cabin and was in the act of writing something upon it.

The strides that carried Cold-Deck Carl forward were cat-like, for they were absolutely without noise.

When he stopped he was not six feet from the man writing slowly in the moonlight, his broad shoulders almost filling the doorway.

Carl's arm went up till it was on a level with Goldspur's head, and the white tip of the rolled manifesto which protruded from the barrel of his revolver almost touched The Man of the Velvet Hand.

All at once Cold Deck Carl dissipated the somewhat thrilling tableau.

"Turn!" he cried, and as Hercules Goldspur wheeled upon him, he continued: "I've brought your manifesto back."

The growl of the tiger about to spring upon his hunters was in Carl's voice, the glare of the jungle to his eyes was in his.

"Do ou want it, Hercules?" Carl went on. "It's s... out ov my dropper an' I'm goin' ter shoot it inter yer brain! Writin' another, war ye?"

For a second there was no reply.

Never before had such a splendid target been presented to a mad marksman like Cold-Deck Carl.

Hercules Goldspur looked more magnificent than ever in his rich lace-trimmed jacket, tight pantaloons and high yellow-topped boots whose heels were ornamented by the spurs which had given him the name he bore.

"Shoot!" he cried looking into his tracker's eyes. "Drawin' yer blood-line around Ycu-Bet, eh? I don't want the manifesto you've poked inter yer dropper, an' I'm not goin' ter take it, either!"

With the last word there was a pantherish leap forward of a human hand.

Curving slightly upward as it shot out, it sent Carl's arm from its level, and pushed on to his throat.

The lightning-like spring was the work of a second.

Brain and arm had worked together, and in an instant the velvet hand of the giant Apollo of Idaho was at Cold-Deck Carl's throat.

"How about shootin' my paper through me now?" laughed the victor whose black eyes glittered with victory. "Don't you think something ov postponin' ther job, Cold-Deck? You had me awhile ago an' you let ther opportunity slip. Fool!"

Cold-Deck Carl saw the eyes of Hercules Goldspur dance like dervishes; but he could not speak.

The grip of that velvet hand at his throat seemed to paralyze all his powers.

The strength of the laced giant was prodigious.

"I want to introduce you to some friends who have just come to You-Bet," continued Hercules. "Come, my train-stopper. They want to see you; I know they do. Ou, what a fool you've been to-night, Carl. You had Hercules Goldspur at the muzzle of your revolver an' you wouldn't shoot. The manifesto will never be taken back. Ho! ho! How do you like the grip ov the velvet hand?"

With his silken fingers still at Carl's throat, Hercules began to drag his victim away.

This seemed no task at all, though Cold-Deck Carl could hardly keep his feet, so merciless was the choking he had already received.

He kept his consciousness by the workings of a mighty will power, for he wanted to see the new arrivals mentioned by the Northwest Hercules.

Past the cabins and around the base of a hill he was conveyed by his captor, then into the mouth of a gulch whose high walls shut out the moonlight and filled the place with shadows.

Would Hercules never stop? And whither was he taking his victim?

At last Carl heard for a moment a confused murmur of voices, and all at once the giant came to halt.

"We are hyar!" he said to Carl.

The captive attempted to straighten himself, but that awful hand was an incubus he could not shake off.

The following moment he saw a number of indistinct figures, and then—he was hurled from Goldspur's hands.

"There!" cried Hercules. "There! red wolves of the silver trails, is one of the men you want!" And as Carl fell among twenty Indians, the giant walked away!

CHAPTER VIII.

GETTING OUT OF THE TRAP.

A GRIM smile wreathed the lips of Hercules Goldspur as he walked from the spot where he had given Cold Deck Carl to the red-skins whose hands had seized him before he could defend himself or attempt an escape.

"They wanted a victim and they have him," was all he said.

From whence had those Indians come, who

were they, and what had brought them to You-Bet?

Indians were not uncommon visitors to the wildcat city along the track of the Northern Pacific.

They came and went at their own good pleasure, trading with the miners drinking Joe's worse whisky, and it was bad, or lounged about the town for the purpose of stealing anything that was portable.

They were, for the most part, Sioux, strapping big fellows with hang-dog visages, ready to make a man hold up in the mountains, or to plunder a cabin when its owner's back was turned.

On several occasions prior to the date of our story, the exasperated citizens of You-Bet had held lynch court and treated several of these red thieves to a well-adjusted noose; others had been hunted down and shot without the shadow of a hearing, and badly spelled placards warning the Indian to keep his distance had been posted on rock and tree.

This summary work had produced a certain effect for a season.

The savages had remained away for so long a time as six months, when some of the bolder ones ventured back with good horses for trade, and a few ounces of dust.

These articles condoned their past offenses in the eyes of the roughs of You-Bet, and Joe added to his exchequer, while the Indians depleted his stock of liquors and lost silver and steeds.

Things went on as usual until the red-skins fell back into their old habits of pilfering which called another Vigilance Committee into existence, and the inoffensive Sioux was summoned to depart to healthier regions.

Again You-Bet had rest, rest for several months, or until the night that witnessed the scenes described in the preceding chapter.

The iron-horse whose first appearance in the wild Northwest had frightened the Indian, frightened him no longer.

The shriek of the locomotive possessed no terrors for him now.

He rode his horse up to the track and gazed placidly at the train as it swept past him; he even rode on it, the red-skinned lord of the smoking-car; and got off at the first station to plunder the first cabin found unprotected.

Indians of the description just mentioned were those who had come to You Bet.

Twenty in number and well-mounted and armed, they were ready for anything that might turn up.

Their leader was a man who was Hercules Goldspur's equal in physique.

This red giant was the first man to catch Cold-Deck Carl as he was flung from Goldspur's hands into their midst.

His arm pushed the arms of his followers back, and his glance made them keep their distance.

It was some moments before Carl recovered. The grip of the velvet hand was something terrible.

He felt it in every fiber of his system, and the fingers seemed to be crushing his windpipe, although he knew that Hercules was already far away.

The stalwart Sioux held his prisoner at arms' length and for some moments gazed in silence into his face.

Goldspur's last words still rung in Carl's ears.

"There, red wolves of the silver trails, is one of the men you want."

Did the Indians want him?

If they did, for what?

"White man fall in to the Sioux's hands at last!" suddenly exclaimed the giant who held him: "Him no more lift his hand an' say, 'Hang Indian! him only a dog!'"

"I never did that," replied Carl. "By my soul! Hercules Goldspur has lied. I never sat in judgment on a red-skin, an' I never will."

"White face lies like a Pawnee squaw!" flashed the Sioux. "Goldspur, no lie to Indian. Him no split tongue."

"If you intend that fer a joke, it's a daisy," laughed Cold-Deck Carl. "No! Hercules Goldspur won't lie. Pardon me, my cherubs. I slandered him when I accused him of falsehood. But he handles the truth in a reckless manner sometimes. Hercules Goldspur! The time will yet come when I will shoot your infernal manifesto through your head."

"Mebbe so, white-face."

That remark seemed to bring Carl back to his present situation.

"Wal, are you goin' ter keep me on the word ov the devil who has just walked off?" he asked. "He said you wanted me, didn't he? Wal, what do you want me for?"

"Big Wolf has spoken. White-face has said, 'Hang Injun!' an' the men of the camp have pulled 'im up."

"I say it's a lie!" cried Carl. "I don't care who told you so. It is an infamous lie. The man who uttered it dares not face me. It's a case of mistaken identity. I never saw You-Bet until to-night. I have condemned no Indian to the noose. You have heard the lie of the biggest, meanest coward in Idaho—Hercules Goldspur!"

He elevated his voice as he finished, in hopes that The Man of the Velvet Hand might be within hearing, but no answer, not even a laugh of derision, came back.

He saw that the Indians took no stock in his asseverations.

Disbelief was traceable on their countenances, and he saw that unless he escaped from their clutches he was doomed.

"White-face come along," said Big Wolf in response to his denouncement of Hercules. "The big white man no lie to Injun."

"Of course not," sneered Carl. "One thing you daren't do, an' thet is to take me back to You-Bet, an' let me meet him face to face."

Big Wolf shook his head, and his grip tightened on Carl's arm.

"Come," he said.

The desperado's eyes flashed defiance.

"Not a step till you tell me what you are goin' ter do with me," he said. "I'm no infant ter be dragged over ther ground by a lot ov painted skunks. Not a step till you speak. Remember that I am Cold-Deck Carl, not from Mariposa, but fresh from Pistol Gulch, in Arizona."

For a moment the stalwart Sioux regarded the prisoner with a look of contempt, then his eyes changed suddenly to a flash, and he stepped back.

"White-face find out by'm by," he said, and as his hand went upward the whole band leaped at Carl.

They seemed about to tear him to pieces, for he was caught on every side and lifted clear of the ground before he could resist in the least.

Hercules Goldspur might have struggled in vain among those red-skins; as for Carl, not so strong as the giant, he was helpless from the first.

Before he could collect his senses, scattered by the sudden laying on of hands, he was carried from the spot and placed upon the back of a horse which stood in the midst of a number of steeds, whose saddles were dirty blankets, fastened on after the Indian manner.

In less than a minute, it seemed to Cold-Deck Carl, he was fastened to the horse by a rope which passed under the girth and secured his ankles, and then at a signal from Big Wolf, the whole band dashed away.

The only extra horse in the lot was ridden by the prisoner, and he had a chance to study his captors as they galloped along now through a gulch, now over a little plain and then across the railroad track almost in the far-spreading glare of a locomotive's head light.

More than once Cold-Deck Carl ground his teeth till they seemed to crack.

Fifty times he clinched his hands and uttered oaths of vengeance.

He was going from You-Bet against his will, leaving all the actors in the wild Northwest drama behind, leaving Hercules Goldspur triumphant, the Happy Rattler at the bottom of the mine, and all his schemes abortive!

These thoughts were bitter ones.

"I'll have to wait an' see what the red skunks ar' goin' ter do with me," he said at the end of his musings. "I'd give a million if I had it fer a solid grip on my revolvers. Thar'd be some dead Injuns hyarabouts. Hercules, curse him! I knew t' whom he flung me half dead. He an' Big Wolf hev an' understandin'. I'd like ter go back tee You-Bet an' tell the men ov that devil's hold that the gold-laced gentleman is in league with a thievin' Sioux who bez fetched twenty red skins hyar fer a purpose. By heavens! I will go back! Hevn't I sworn by the colonel's corpse thet I would win iff this game fer gold? Didn't I send fer the colonel, tellin' him thet the girl war in You-Bet an' thet hyar we'd begin ther game together? They killed ther colonel an' left me. They spared ther life ov one who always holds trumps at ther end ov ther game. Cold-Deck Carl plays a bad hand, Hercules Goldspur—a bad hand, Mr. Big Wolf—a terrible hand, you who shot my pard, ther colonel."

These words fell in hisses from the lips of the man who, Indian-surrounded, was leaving You-Bet still further behind him.

All at once Big Wolf appeared at his side.

The Sioux had dropped back from the head of the band, and his eyes were an avaricious question as they met Carl's gaze.

"What White-face got?" he asked.

"Got?" repeated Carl, his dark face lighting up at the question.

"More than the devil who threw me into yer clutches."

"Silver?"

"A tun ov it in the best mine in Idaho."

Big Wolf's eyes glistened.

He laid his red hand on the gambler-sport's arm, and sent a swift glance among his followers.

"We see, White-face," he said in a whisper, and then went back to the head of his band.

A minute afterward the Indians who had surrounded Carl from the capture urged their steeds into a "aster gallop and passed him.

He was alone.

In an instant he spoke to his horse and the animal as if glad to obey the command stopped while the words still sounded.

"Fortune's strikin' me hard!" he ejaculated. "By the eternal heavens! to-morrow will see me back in You-Bet. Then, look out, you ov the ther velvet hand! We'll begin ther second act ov ther play, when I git thar. I know who I've got ter fight now—you an' ther feller what dropped ther colonel. I don't care fer Pigmy Pete. I kin make terms with him. Thet black-eyed Mexican ov his I'll hev on my side afore long. I'll come out on top at ther end ov there fight. Hello!"

The exclamation was caused by the appearance of a horse and his rider who came from the direction taken by the Indians who had disappeared.

Cold-Deck Carl awaited the man with much interest and soon found himself face to face with Big Wolf.

"Where is the silver?" asked the Sioux.

"In the mine."

"Where mine?"

"Back yonder," and Carl's hand pointed toward You-Bet miles away.

"How much?"

"Hevn't I said—a tun?"

"An' it shall be Big Wolf's?"

"Yes."

There was the glitter of a knife-blade in the star gleam, and Cold-Deck Carl found his limbs free.

A shout of triumph which he could not keep back burst from his throat.

"Injuns ride off," resumed the Sioux chief.

"Now, White-face, we will take the silver trail. The big man off-red Big Wolf no silver an' without silver an Indian can't play in the mountain camps. Come."

The listener looked searchingly into the Indian's face.

"Any way to get back to You-Bet," he muttered. "I'm goin' thar; but I don't own the first rock of silver, but what ov it? I'll get rid ov ther Injan. He's betrayed Hercules an' he'll betray me. Back ter You-Bet! Look out fer ther man what ar' comin' back ter kill!"

He turned the head of his horse toward the wild-cat city by the railroad, and he and the red-skin rode rapidly forward.

They watched one another as if afraid of treachery, and not a word was spoken for several miles.

"The red devil is actually goin' back ter ther town," murmured Cold-Deck Carl at length. "H's got more grit than I thought he had. My shadowy bonanza tempts him. My silver mine!" and the gambler laughed to himself.

Suddenly he leaned toward the Sioux, and saw his chance.

The next second his hand darted at Big Wolf's throat, and as it closed there, the long arms of the Sioux fell about his body, and the two men fell to the ground in a struggle for the mastery.

"I want no Injan traitor with me in You-Bet," hissed Cold-Deck Carl. "I go back alone, er stay hyar fer ther buzzards!"

CHAPTER IX.

PIGMY PETE'S PARD.

THE Happy Rattler from Silver Bow and his strange pard, Kicking George, were not missed when they left Joe's saloon to meet with the catastrophe which we have seen overtake them.

Nobody thought of following them, and the singular pair were left to shift for themselves.

If the Rattler had been followed no one would have thought of looking for him in the depths of the old mine, and Cold Deck Carl was not the man to go back and lend a helping hand to the person he had sent to a terrible doom.

The man from Silver Bow had come and gone.

He was eccentric and migratory, and was known throughout the Northwest for his jolly good nature.

He had never been known to think seriously of one thing for a moment, and everybody had looked upon him as a crack-brained individual, never without money, and always hunting a bar for his donkey to kick to pieces.

But, as we have seen, the Happy Rattler had settled his mind on one thing and that was that Zoe was the long-lost child for whose return to a certain ranch in Arizona there was a long-standing reward, and his language has led us to infer that he had come to You-Bet with a well-defined purpose connected with the lost heir.

Cold Deck Carl seemed to be aware of this, else he would not have forced the two pards down the mouth of the mine.

In doing this Carl was only clearing his way.

We cannot say that he really feared the good-natured individual from Silver Bow, but as he knew who Zoe was and moreover was in his way, he thought it best to get rid of him.

It was very late on the night with which we have been dealing all along, that a little man with a quick nervous gait crossed the main thoroughfare of You-Bet, and walked toward the mines.

It was Pigmy Pete alone, and evidently with a purpose in view.

"Had fingers at my throat to-night, the kind what choke, too," the dwarf said to himself as he shrugged his shoulders. "By my life! Cold-Deck Carl meant bizness. I saw that by his eyes. Lola's diamonds bluffed him, an' he took

his spite out on me. He felt like he had ter do suthin', an' so he jumped at my throat. Gods! he's a tiger, that fellar is; got a grip like a steel-trap. I war an infant in his hands, an' if Hercules hadn't interfered I wouldn't be hyar now. Nary a spectator war going to interfere. Ther' seems ter be a standin' rule in You-Bet ter let all fights take keer ov themselves. Hercules came just in the nick o' time an' I'm all hunk, barrin' a slight soreness about my windpipe. It war a close call, Lola. I kin do without any more ov ther same kind."

Past the mine that held the pards from Silver Bow went the little man, and disappeared among the shafts north of the town.

He did not stop until he reached a pile of rocks, one of which, at the foot of the heap, he raised and looked beneath it.

This stone was of peculiar shape and was easily distinguished from the rest. It lay at the edge of the heap and made a good mountain post-office.

Not satisfied with having looked under the stone, Pigmy Pete felt around with his hand in search of a letter which, owing to the uncertain light, might have escaped his eyes.

His search which was diligent and continued for several minutes revealed nothing, and Pigmy Pete rose with a sigh of disappointment.

"Not yet," he said in audible tones. "Mebbe I'm a little too previous, but it strikes me he ought ter be hyar. Ain't you comin', pard? Me an' Lola hev played our part of the comedy pretty well, but you oughter be hyar ter help ther thing out. No letter an' no man. You couldn't miss this stone-heap, fer I sent ye word just how ter find it without mistake."

Pigmy Pete's disappointment was genuine, and he was about to deepen it by another search when a slight noise made him turn, and he stood face to face with a man whose arrowy figure rendered him ghost-like in the pale silvery rays of the moon.

"Great God! you at last, Ferd—"

"Hush! no names here," said the man as his hand fell on Pigmy Pete's arm. "I am here myself and that's why you found no letter under the stone. What do you know?"

"A good deal, pard."

"That's good."

"Me an' Lola hev found out a few things, ef we haven't been a year in You-Bet. I warn't more than in ther town than a fellar got his finger onto my throat an' choked me inter Star-edom. Cuss him! pard. I will return ther comoliment one o' these days. I will pay 'im back, er my name's not Pigmy Pete, Queen Lola's pard."

The countenance of the listener betrayed his anxiety while Pete talked, showing a pair of mad little eyes while he rattled off his words.

In person the man who had come to the stone-pile instead of the letter was a head taller than the Happy Rattler, whom he resembled in the color of his eyes.

He was tall, wiry and quite handsome, and was clad in rather rough clothes, which did not seem to be his usual garments.

He had doubtless passed the fiftieth mile-stone of life, for his abundant locks were iron-gray. Nobody could see the contour of his mouth for the mustache that covered it.

* Armed with two revolvers, the butts of which were observable to Pigmy Pete, the man looked capable of contending with any enemy.

He was quick and keen-eyed, one of those men whose first glance is a deadly aim.

"I have asked you what you know, and you have said a good deal," said this man after Pigmy Pete had finished. "That isn't very satisfactory."

"Well, she is hyar."

"What! am I so near her, then?" and the speaker recoiled a step. "My God! Pete, can it be that after so many years I am about to fold her to my heart once more?"

"I don't know about that," remarked Pigmy Pete, looking at the man in his agitation. "That depends on circumstances. Thar seems ter be a few difficulties in ther way. Yes, she's hyar in You-Bet this very minute, but she's got a pectector, an' he's a jumper what you read about. That isn't all. Thar's a man hyar called Cold Deck Carl. Says he's from Mariposa, but that's a lie. He may hev a pard somewhar in the vicinity—"

"He had one," interrupted the grizzled man, quickly; "but he left him down in the gulch."

"Afraid ter show himself in You Bet, eh?"

"No. I made him stay in the gulch."

"You, Ferd—"

"Yes, I killed him!"

Pigmy Pete recoiled a step and stared into the face of his companion.

"Have you begun ter kill already?" he ejaculated. "Why, you haven't been hyar six hours."

A faint smile brightened the face of the stranger.

"I would be recreant to my heaven-registered vow if I had not shot that man on sight," he said, suddenly relaxing into seriousness.

"When my eyes fell upon him, all the wrongs of past years surged up in my heart, and I shot him."

"Then it was—"

"The colonel, of course."

A moment's silence followed this announcement.

"Thar's one less for us ter tackle hyar," said Pigmy Pete when he spoke again. "But Cold-Deck Carl is still on hand. Then, The Man of the Velvet Hand is here."

"He is the other man I must have seen to-night."

"He's a daisy giant, isn't he? Saved me from Cold-Deck's fingers, thet closed on my windpipe because Lola bluffed him with her diamonds. I owe that jumper one."

"But if necessary you'd forego the pleasure of thanking him for his service?"

"Try me. I'm yer man for anything. I belong ter you body an' soul an' I guess I speak for Lola when I say this. Them diamonds ov her'n'd bluff anybody on top o' ground. I like Hercules Goldspur fer what his velvet hand did fer me to-night, but say ther word an' I'll hate him. Do you know that he's Zoe's stand-by?"

"That soft-handed Hercules?"

"That's just what he is—Zoe's pectector."

"My child's friend! Zoe, I am here for my long-lost girl. Are you going to go back to the old ranch with me, or will you cling to Hercules Goldspur, The Man of the Velvet Hand?"

"You'd better ask her that question; I'm not capable of answerin' it," said Pigmy Pete.

"I kin say, however, that she'll go back with you. We hev'n't come hyar fer nothin'. Lola an' me hev'n't played travelin' spies all these long months fer fun, an' now that we've found yer child, Ferd, we'll see that she goes home. You saved my life, Hercules Goldspur, but if my master says kill you, your life will not be worth a digger's breakfast. I'm Pigmy Pete, but I'm as handy with the revolver as Lola is with the cards."

Not a word replied to the little man's outburst of devotion.

He looked into his companion's face, and saw him turn slowly away.

"Heaven, can it be that I am really near my child?" he said in whispers. "After years of search have I reached her at last? Help me to go on to the end, to take her back to the old home and see her strew her mother's grave with flowers. Zoe! Zoe! all my heart flows out to you to-night. I am here—your father, with hair whitened by suffering, yet with a determination to fight his way, if need be, to happiness and success. I have already killed. The blood of the man who planned your abduction, Zoe, is on my hands, and I may be compelled to redden them again. I am ready! I have not hunted all these years to shrink from the end. I am here for you, Zoe. If necessary I am here to kill a thousand times!"

The last word still quivered the man's lips when he turned upon Pigmy Pete again.

He came forward, calm and self-possessed, showing himself ready for any emergency.

"To work, Pete!" he said. "The work begins to-night. I want to see my child. 'Where is she?'"

"This way," was the reply, and Pigmy Pete started off with an eager man at his heels.

"You, an' me, an' Lola in You-Bet will keep ther pot b'ilin' ef they give us any trouble."

At that moment a man stepped out from the shadow of the stone-pile.

"You can't have the girl, Ferd Sutter. I say no!" he said.

It was Hercules Goldspur.

CHAPTER X.

LOLA'S MISSION.

BEAUTIFUL beyond description was the morning that followed the night whose scenes we have attempted to record in the foregoing chapters.

One of the first persons astir was a keen-eyed little man who was seen leaning against one of the cabins with his arms folded upon his breast.

"Missed her, bey?" he exclaimed. "The Man ov the Velvet Hand has taken ther first trick, an' me an' my pard an' stumped. Must hev smoked 'im out last night an' varosed with the daisy. Just in time, too, fer ef Ferd gits his fingers on his own, nothin' kin tear 'im loose."

Although daylight had fairly broken upon the mountain-town, Pigmy Pete was the only person seen in his immediate vicinity.

He looked fresh, as if he had enjoyed a good sleep, probably in the cabin against which he leaned.

The little man had passed a few hours of You-Bet's memorable night beyond the threshold near which he stood; but he was not the sole tenant of the place.

It was then occupied by the person who had accompanied him to You-Bet, the deep-eyed Mexican girl who had staked her diamonds against Cold-Deck Carl's bills.

Lola, who had just risen, stood at the little window of the hut, her eyes sparkling with excitement, and her mind at work.

"Why doesn't he come?" she suddenly said aloud in an impatient strain. "Hercules Goldspur has run off the girl, Zoe. If they don't watch, he will prove more than a match for them. Where is Pete?"

"Hyar," and the opening door revealed the

figure of the little desperado. "I'm always on hand, Lola, when I'm wanted. What's up?"

The girl's eyes lighted up at sight of the speaker.

"Why doesn't Ferd come?"

"He will, when he realizes that Zoe is gone," replied Pete. "The news hit him like a hammer. I thought he wouldn't give in that way. He says that he came too late and then talks about havin' Hercules Goldspur's blood. When he gets that, Lola, it'll be a cold day in You Bet—a sorter chilly wave."

"Why, Pete?"

"Because that giant's no fool. He war up ter snuff last night. Ther first trick he's been scooped in by ther Velvet Hand."

"And Ferd?"

"Mad as a bull, he'll foller."

Lola was silent for a moment.

"I pity him," she said, feelingly. "Just when he expected to fold his child to his breast, Hercules Goldspur steps in between. I could kill that man!"

The hands of the Mexican beauty clinched as she hissed forth the sentence threatening The Man of the Velvet Hand.

"You kill him, Lola? Why, my little girl, that velvet hand of his could crush ye!"

Instantly the girl's eyes flashed.

"I will give him an opportunity!" she exclaimed. "He shall know me before we've done with him. I thanked him last night for saving you from Cold-Deck Carl's grip—now I hate him. He has robbed Ferdinand Sutter of his daughter. He has run the girl off to keep her from happiness and the old ranch in Arizona. He shall give up his prize. I say so. I swear it!"

An impulsive stride carried her to the door, and she was about to rush from the hut when Pigmy Pete wheeled upon her.

"Wear ar' ye goin'?" he demanded.

"I shall strike the trail while it is hot!"

"Alone?"

"Why not? Haven't I told you that I am not afraid of that silken hand which charms people even while it chokes them? I know where my horse is."

A good-by glance followed the last word, and a bound on the girl's part left Pigmy Pete the sole occupant of the cabin.

"She'll go!" he ejaculated. "Stir that girl's blood and you make a she wild-cat of her. I couldn't keep her back. She's got a head of her own, and she's willin' ter put it ag'in' Goldspur's. Confound her! let her go!"

As for Lola she walked rapidly from the town to a thicket near by, which she penetrated and found two horses, one of which she led away.

"Pigmy Pete may follow if he desires. I shall not ask him to help me," she said. "What! Lola afraid of Hercules Goldspur? The thought is ridiculous!" And a light, fearless laugh rippled over the lips of the black-eyed beauty.

In less than a minute afterward the girl was mounted on the horse whose head she turned to the north as if confident that Hercules Goldspur had gone in that direction.

By this time You-Bet was fully astir, and as she rode past the gambling-den a man rushed out and seized the bridle of her steed.

It was Joe, the proprietor of the saloon.

"Goin' away, eh?" he exclaimed, looking up into Lola's face.

"It looks like it, doesn't it?"

"I should remark. You'd better not go. Ther ar' Injuns in the neighborhood."

"No!"

"Fact! They war within a mile of town last night, and the Express nearly ran inter a gang of 'em near ther Devil's Gap. You'd better not go."

Lola laughed.

"I was partly raised among Indians," she said. "You'll have to frighten me some other way, Joseph."

"By George, I will!"

"By Kicking George, do you mean?" smiled the girl.

"Not by a long shot. If you're goin' arter Hercules, let me advise you to stay hyar."

Lola started slightly.

"What do you know, Joseph?"

"That the Velvet Hand took a big trick last night," was the quick response, in a lowered tone of voice. "He took Zoe away, and left this behind."

"This" was a bit of paper which Joe displayed to Lola's gaze as he finished, and the girl took it eagerly from his hand.

The next minute she had read:

"TO WHOM MY ACT DISPLEASES:—

"Zoe an' I are pard. Don't follow us. My hand never forgets its cunning." Pardon the boast.

"HERCULES GOLDSBUR."

From the brief message left behind, Lola looked down into the quizzical face of the saloonist of You-Bet.

"Don't follow us!" she laughed. "And, my hand never forgets its cunning. Those words would stop you, Joseph?"

"Hang me ef they oughtn't to check any one who knows ther dandy clipper what writ 'em," was the answer. "I wouldn't foller him now

fer a dozen bonanzas. What's the girl ter you, Lola?"

"Nothing much; but she's a good deal ter a certain man who came to You Bet last night."

"Workin' fer another, eh?—riskin' yer throat fer some one else? Why, Hercules would as lief choke a woman—"

"Enough!" broke in the Mexican girl. "I shall not shrink from that velvet hand he brags of. I have registered an oath in Heaven. I am going to hunt him down. He shall give Zoe back to her father. I Lola, have sworn that he shall! I, too, have a game to win!"

"Try it on. That's my answer, not my advice," said Joe. "But you'll rue the day you started out ter hunt Ther Man o' the Velvet Hand. Couldn't Pigmy Pete do anything with yer?"

"No," laughed Lola, and before Joe could speak again, the girl spoke to her horse, and left him standing alone in front of his ranch.

After gazing after her for a moment, he walked back into the place and refreshed himself with a glass of his villainous decoction.

"Gone ter hunt Hercules, eh?" he ejaculated, as he set the glass down with a hearty emphasis. "I'll bet ten ter one that she gets scooped ther first game."

"I'll take that bet ef it lays me flat on my back."

Joe wheeled instantly at sound of the voice, and the speaker walked forward with a pair of sparkling eyes in his head.

"Way didn't you stop 'er, Pigmy?" cried Joe, as he recognized his visitor.

"Stop that girl? stop Lola?" exclaimed Pigmy Pete. "Kin ye stop a Northern Pacific Express by standin' on ther track?"

"Wal, hardly, Pigmy?"

"Then I couldn't stop Lola. She war bound ter go."

The next instant Joe strode to where the dwarf stood, and his hand fell like a trip-hammer upon his shoulder.

"Ar' ye married ter Lola?" he asked.

"No."

"That's a blessed thing for yer feelin's, fer ef ye war, Pigmy, an' she fools with Hercules Goldspur's plans, ye'd be a bloomin' widower, an' no mistake. She's only yer pard, hey?"

"That's all."

"Wal, my opinion is that ye'll soon hev ter look out fer another poker queen."

"I'll trust that gal. I saw her tackle a grizzly once, and I guess Hercules is no worse."

"Worse than twenty bars. It's not ther fellar's eyes ner his strength, but it's that infernal hand, ez soft ez cotton, but sure as death itself."

Joseph, otherwise plain "Joe," seemed to have a dread of the giant's hand, and a shudder passed over his frame as he went back to his usual station.

"Changin' ther subject, Pigmy," he said. "I wonder what's become of ther Happy Rattler an' his long-eared pard? Kicked ther daylight out of my bar last night, yer know, but a hundred paid all damages an' gave me a decent profit besides. He's a jumper, he is, an' George, his pard, talks business with his hind legs."

At that moment the Happy Rattler and his donkey were not in the most comfortable of situations.

CHAPTER XI.

ON HIS MUSCLE.

HERCULES GOLDSBUR and Zoe had left You-Bet together.

In the night, shortly after Ferdinand Sutter's vow to take his child back to the home in Arizona, the door leading to Zoe's little apartment was opened without noise, and the stalwart figure of The Man of the Velvet Hand crossed the room with the tread of a cat.

His hand fell upon the white wrist of the sleeping girl.

"The time has come," he said in reply to Zoe's stare. "We leave You-Bet."

"Never to return?"

"Circumstances must decide."

"You are taking me from those who seek me?"

"Yes."

"From my father."

"That is true."

Zoe hesitated and drew back.

"We must go," said Hercules in determined tones, his soft hand tightening perceptibly around Zoe's wrist. "I have said that they should not have you without my consent. I cannot give it now."

"Why not?"

"Because, to the words I heard to-night, I have said No. I promised you, Zoe, that before long you should decide between us all. I am The Man of the Velvet Hand. There are worse men than me in Idaho—in You-Bet, at this very moment. Maybe I'll discard my nick-names one of these days. But I can't talk here. Come, Zoe."

Without further remonstrance Zoe left the room with the giant, his hand still at her wrist, and the two glided from the building across the town to two horses already caparisoned for a ride.

Taking the girl in his strong arms, Hercules Goldspur placed Zoe upon one of the steeds, and mounted the other himself.

Triumph lighted up the giant's eyes, and they flashed with pride as he regarded the girl at his side.

Away went the two horses side by side, and their hoofs sounded over the mountain trail as they left You-Bet behind.

Suddenly Hercules burst into a laugh.

"Zoe," he said, turning upon his companion as it ended, "you ought to have seen me give the red-skins a feast to-night!"

"The Indians?" exclaimed Zoe. "Have they come back to You-Bet?"

"Yes. I caught a victim, dragged him to the red devils, and flung him headlong into their midst. Hal! hal! how he must have cursed me ere they finished him. He's the chap who war goin' ter draw a blood-line round this district. He'll never do that, Zoe—never!"

The girl heard the giant through in silence, but with her gaze riveted on his face.

She seemed to understand, yet his tones seemed to convey a mystery to her ears.

"Zoe," he went on, "the man I served thus wanted you."

"Not my father?"

"No."

"Cold-Deck Carl?"

"That's the fellar. He pitched headlong among ther red-skins when I gave him a gentle toss. What is he now? He'll never play ag'in' Lola's diamonds any more."

For some miles further on neither spoke a word, and the first sound of a human voice was the slight one with which Hercules stopped both steeds.

"Thar's suthin' ahead," he said, with a glance at Zoe as he dismounted, and then she saw him enter the bush-fringed pass at whose mouth they had halted.

Although Zoe watched him intently she soon saw him disappear.

With a revolver in his left hand, Hercules Goldspur glided down the gulch, making no noise whatever with his feet, which seemed to choose the ground over which they advanced.

All at once he halted and then put up his pistol.

"Pshaw! two hands ar' worth a dozen revolvers in a place like this," he murmured. "Zoe an' I ar' not the only people out ter-night. Hyar come some sneaks whose wind will be choked off before they know I'm around."

His keen ears had heard the slight noise made by the two creeping figures that were advancing up the ravine, and a moment later his watchful eyes detected them.

"Red-skins!" he almost hissed. "I hev'n't felt an Injun's wind pipe fer a year, but I hev'n't lost my grip. Come on, my red chums. I'm hyar with the usual compliments of Hercules Goldspur."

Nearer and nearer came the gliding red-skins, now plainly seen by the man whose figure could not be seen for the bushes among which he crouched.

A faint smile played with the white man's lips.

He watched the Indians, confident of victory. At last the two red skins were opposite his station, and all at once he darted at them, with a low cry which brought them upon their feet.

"On, it's me, reddies!" fell from his lips.

At the same moment a hand shot at each of the Indians' throats, and closed on them with wonderful velvet fingers as he smote their heads together with the ease of a Samson.

"I'm in my element now!" he ejaculated, as thwack! thwack! went the skulls of the red-skins together, with a noise that was terribly suggestive of broken heads.

He handled the bucks as he could have handled a pair of belligerent clowns. The utmost ease, and without seeming to tax his great strength.

"I guess ye'r presentable now," he said at last starting toward the spot where he had left Zoe, dragging the Indians on either side as he moved over the ground.

He reappeared to Zoe with fire in his eyes.

"Two of my friends, Zoe!" he laughed holding the unconscious Indians up for her inspection. "They're the advance guard of a squad that ain't a mile away. It's ther same band what trimm'd Cold-Deck down. Goin' back to You-Bet. See! I've tumped 'em together till they've gone ter sleep."

The sight of two half-naked and unconscious Indians with bleeding heads was not a plea: one for Zoe, and she turned away with a shudder.

"We'll leave 'em hyar," said Hercules. "Maybe we'll hev a tussle with the others but I won't seek it. Thar war a time, Zoe—"

He stopped.

The noise that called forth the girl's "Hark!" had also reached his ears.

He turned in time to see the flitting figures that came from the direction from which he had dragged his victims.

The next instant the ravine rung with yells.

"Down on yer horse, Zoe!" cried Hercules. "Turn an' ride fer life, but stop at ther last creek we crossed."

Then, whipping out his revolvers, he threw himself into the midst of the red-skins and began to shoot right and left.

"Take me anyway I'm somewhat of a success!" he cried in loud tones as he worked the deadly weapons in the faces of the Indians who reeled away. "A pic-nic like this The Man of the Velvet Hand war never known ter shun."

But there was an end to the deadly shots he poured into the ranks of the Indians whose numbers momentarily increased.

He emptied the twelve steel chambers, but his enemies seemed as numerous as ever.

"That's another weapon I'm equally handy with!" he exclaimed. "I cleaned out Santa Fe Mike's saloon with it once."

He stooped and caught up the yet warm body of one of his red victims and whirling it around his head, dashed like a lion brought to bay at his foes.

"Injun ag'in' Injun! Oh, I'm handy with any weapon!" pealed from his throat. "Ye varmints, I'm fightin' fer ther daisiest girl in Idaho, ez well ez fer Hercules Goldspur. Git out ov my way!"

Forced to keep close together by the narrowness of the pass, the Indians found themselves at a disadvantage, and the giant beat them back with the novel but terrible war-club which he swung over his head.

At last as a final effort he flung his weapon into their faces where it struck as a shout of defiance made the welkin ring.

"That's enough fer to-night! Ye know me—Hercules Goldspur!" and he turned toward his horse again.

Twenty feet away he uttered a cry, spun half-way round and then sprung forward.

He reached the mouth of the little pass and saw a horse in the starlight.

"Another wound but I'm still The Man of the Velvet Hand!" he grated falling against the animal whose mane he clutched as he seated himself in the saddle with an effort. "I'll settle with you yet, red-skins. Winged an' staggered, I still have Zoe! She's a bonanza for which Hercules Goldspur is ready to die."

Then, as an outburst of Indian yells rose on the air, he wheeled the steed and rode back over the trail he had made—back toward You-Bet.

Once he rose in his stirrups and with his laced hat in his hand waved defiance at the red enemies in the pass.

"You must kill Hercules Goldspur to harden his velvet hand!" he shouted at the top of his voice, and the words that went back toward his foes brought out another yell of fury.

CHAPTER XII.

HOW A SCALP GOT PARDS.

"GENTLEMEN, thar's a ghost in one ov the mines," said the little man who showed a white face to the group of roughs and toughs that stood in front of Joe's den as the sun went down on You-Bet, the night after Goldspur's encounter with the Indians in the pass.

"I guess not, Pigmy!" laughed a dozen men. "Shoot me fer a gopher ef thar isn't!" was the quick retort and the little man straightened and his eyes flashed. "Didn't I hear a noise down in ther shaft. Ef thar's a man ov ye what hez ther proper grit, let 'im foller me."

"We'll all go. Come, boys. Ef a ghost hez come ter You-Bet we want ter form his acquaintance."

Led by Pigmy Pete who was confident that he had made a genuine discovery, the roughs of You-Bet rushed pell-mell to a certain unused shaft over whose edge several leaned and listened with the little man.

"Ghost! the devil, Pigmy!" suddenly ejaculated one. "It's a mean sell an' yer treat."

"Not yet," and Pigmy Pete sent his voice down the bleak shaft.

"Ar' ye thar yet?" he asked.

"I should remark ter mention, my unwashed seraph!" came back the answer in hollow tones that drove the kneeling listeners to their feet. "Durned ef I couldn't eat a grizzly an' George hyar hez injured his kickin' apparatus. Toss down hyar a decent ration fer ther stomachs ov two skeletons. I'm no ghost; but the Happy Rattler from Silver Bow."

The desperadoes of You-Bet uttered exclamations of surprise.

"We'll pull ye up!" cried Pigmy Pete.

"That's encouragin'. Pull me up! Do ye hear thet, George? We're goin' skyward ag'in up ter daylight an' a squar' meal. Won't we kick satisfaction out ov a certain individual an' win the bonanza yet? Pull us up, pards, an' ther blessin' ov the Rattler an' his gentle pard will never leave ye."

"Up you come, Rattler. Hold yer appetite till we git ready."

Preparations were now made to draw the two pards from Silver Bow to the surface once more.

The wonder in the minds of the denizens of You-Bet was that they were alive to tell the story of thir tumble down the shaft.

All conceded thit their escape from death

bordered on the miraculous, and not one but was willing to extricate them from their critical situation.

In a few minutes a long strong rope was let down, and the Happy Rattler grasped it with an exclamation of joy.

"I'll send George up first," he said.

"That kickin' mule!"

"Yes. George couldn't tie himself ter ther rope ef I went up first."

"That's so; but ain't he dangerous?"

"Not when he's in a fix like this. He's as meek as a rabbit, my blushin' pinks."

"Send 'im up, then."

Five minutes later a voice saying "All right! pull!" came up from the depths of the old shaft, and the twenty brown-armed men who seized the rope and pulled with all their might brought the rope's burden to the top.

After a brief pull, four hoofs lashed close together appeared at the top of the pit, and another effort landed Kicking George safe on the ground.

There he lay well covered with mud, but with submission in his eye; to all outward appearances one of the most innocent creatures in existence.

His exploit in Joe's den, the night before was still fresh in the minds of the roughs of You-Bet, and at a safe distance from the mule's hoofs a consultation was had as to the safest means of releasing him from the rope.

"What! afeared ov thet gentle biped?" came up in impatient tones from below, while the valiant men discussed various projects. "He's as serene as a dead Injun. 'Pon honor, he wouldn't kick his worst enemy now. Send thet rope down hyar, daisies, an' pull up ther Hungry Rattler ov Silver Bow."

This seemed to decide the council, for Pigmy Pete crept up to the donkey, and after sundry pattings and a profuse announcement of his generous intentions, took off the rope, when George instantly got upon his feet as if he had not struck the bottom of that dangerous shaft.

"Kill a mule ef ye kin, boys!" laughed Pigmy Pete. "Thet crittur will live ter split every bar in Idaho!"

The rope lowered now for the Happy Rattler soon found that individual, and in less than a minute after its reception by him, he was being drawn to the top of the shaft.

When he made his appearance in the last streaks of daylight, hatless and well sprinkled with wet clay, he presented a picture that would have called a laugh from the most solemn.

"Not ez I was, but ez I am!" he exclaimed, facing the crowd that greeted him. "Up from the jaws ov death. Whar's your lunch-counter?"

The men of You-Bet seemed to forget that the Happy Rattler had been confined for twenty-four hours without food in the bottom of the shaft, for they crowded about him eager to hear the story of his fall and his remarkable preservation from death.

"A squar' lunch first, explanations afterward," he persisted. "I'll take a b'ar roasted, a bufler stuffed with sage chicks, an', ef not too much trouble to ther cooks, an antelope potpie. I guess that's about ther extent of my first order. Feel kind o' lonesome hyar," and he laid his bronzed hand on his stomach. "Joe, my smiling hoori, get Zoe ter dish up a feast fit fer an epicure."

"Zoe!" exclaimed the liquor-vender of You-Bet, as he recoiled a step. "Don't you know she went off last night?"

"No. Who did she leave with?"

"With Hercules."

"Jehosaphat!" ejaculated the Happy Rattler. "An' I war whar I couldn't prevent it! Ef I hed ther man what said 'jump' I'd tie 'im ter George's bind hoofs. Gone!—Zoe clean gone, an' with Ther Man ov ther Velvet Hand! It's another shock on my gentle natur'. Wal, I'll take thet squar' meal, ef an Injun hez ter cook it."

The next moment the man from Silver Bow broke through the crowd and started toward the gambling-den.

He was followed by his long-eared pard who did not seem to have suffered by the fall save in a slight limp, and also at a respectful distance from those dreaded hoofs by the crowd.

Joe had erected a new bar and the Happy Rattler leaned against it and called out:

"Nominate yer pisen, my wax-figgers. Walk up an' drink ter ther Happy Rattler's return from ther grave."

A You-Bet crowd never displayed any backwardness when invited up to Joe's bar, and two eagles changed hands.

Now, Joe, bring forth the necessities ov life. Empty yer larder an' I'll run a race with hunger an' trimmin's. Set out what ye've got—turkey, cow, hoofs, horns—by George! I'll tackle a potpie ov nails! I wish I could whisper in yer inmost soul, Joseph, thet I'm hungry."

The presiding genius of the place at once placed before the Happy Rattler several dishes

to which he did ample justice despite their coldness.

The crowd stood back and looked on amused and interested.

"It does me good ter see him eat!" said Pigmy Pete. "Twenty-four hours more an' arter his first meal thar'd be a famine in this kentry. I wish Lola could see him git outside ov that repast."

"Lola! ah, yes. She hasn't come back yet, said the man at the little man's elbow."

"Not yet, Dan. Gone ter look arter Hercules Goldspur, an' ther girl he run off last night. She would go. I said no, but bluff a Mexican woman ef ye can."

At that moment the Happy Rattler threw the last well-picked bone on the floor at his feet, his donkey having been fed in one corner of the saloon, and turned to the crowd.

"It war a tumble, it war!" he said. "Half-way down thet blamed shaft thar's a beam an' on it somehow er other me an' George caught an' hung fer a few moments. I tried ter chmb up but it war no go fer all at once ther beam broke an' down we went ag'in. When we lit I didn't know who war on top, but an investigation showed thet it war ther Rattler from Silver Bow. George war lyin' down with his eye cocked up at ther top ov ther shaft laughin' ter himself ter think how he came all ther way ter ther bottom without breakin' a limb. My listenin' gophers, I've hed falls afore, but thet's the durnedest one I ever had. Mud? I should gently remark ter mention," and the speaker glanced at his garments. "I lift up my hand an' say 'Curse ther man what said jump!'"

"Name 'im, Rattler," said Pigmy Pete. "An' we'll cuss 'im, too."

For a moment a serious look and a flashing of his large eyes drove away the good-nature that seemed inseparable from his countenance.

"I delight ter name ther skunk," he exclaimed. "I know what brought him to You-Bet, an' he knows why I am hyar. That's why he sent George an' me ter ther bottom ov ther shaft. If I had him hyar, I'd show 'im how George could spoil his anatomy in three seconds by ther fastest watch in Idaho. Don't I like ther cherub? Why, my bloomin' roses, I could take 'im to my heart an' whisper words ov undyin' affection inter his ear. George 'd know 'im on sight. Mebbe he's left You-Bet because Zoe's gone away. He wants the girl. He'd hold her fer a ransom an' marry her besides. I'll name him, pards, I'll—"

The Happy Rattler stopped suddenly and with eyes that seemed about to fly from his head, started toward the door.

"What's ther use ov namin' him?" he exclaimed, glancing at the crowd, as he pointed toward the portal. "He's come back an' saved me thet trouble. Feast yer eyes on him, chromos ov You Bet. Thar stands ther man who said 'jump' ter George an' me last night!"

Already the denizens of the wild-cat city were staring at the man who stood in the doorway with a wild, triumphant flash in his black eyes.

"I am the man!" he suddenly cried, as he came forward, without a weapon in either hand, but with defiance in his swift glances that took in the entire crowd. "I have first to settle with a man more worthy of my hate than that gentleman from Silver Bow. Men of You-Bet, where is the coward who calls himself The Man of the Velvet Hand?"

"Gone!" answered Pigmy Pete for the crowd. "Cold-Deck Carl, ye'r a little too late."

A shade of bitter disappointment passed over the face of the gambler-sport.

"Gone! but I will find him!" he grated. "A man who would throw a helpless human among a lot ov Injuns deserves only ter die! He feared I would come back. I am here to throw into his face the scalp of the scarlet devil to whom he flung me. This is it! this is the still wet scalp of the head demon ov the Sioux marauders—Big Wolf."

There was a rush forward as Cold-Deck Carl held up to the gaze of all, the long scalp of the Indian whom he had overcome during the ride back to You-Bet.

A wild cheer greeted the bloody trophy.

"We'll take ye inter full communion fer thet, Cold-Deck," cried several voices. "Count on the men ov You-Bet fer yer pards! We'll help ye play any hand you pick up, an' stand by yer through thick an' thin."

An instant later Cold-Deck Carl stood in the midst of the excited crowd whose friendship he had gained by one act—the scalping of the greatest red enemy the wild-cat town had ever had.

As for the Happy Rattler, his countenance fell, and finding himself entirely deserted by the men who were about to swear eternal hatred against Cold-Deck Carl, he went sullenly to the corner where his donkey was still eating his hay and laid his hand on his back and said in a hoarse whisper:

"Mankind is blamed unsert'in, pard! Ther men ov You-Bet hev a new love. An Injun's ha'r did it all. George, you an' I don't crawl ter any scalp. Ther man what said 'jump!' last night is back. He's made pards ov all You-Bet, but by ther eternal heavens! he shall yet be tied ter yer tail."

CHAPTER XIII.

THE LAUGHER SHOTS.

YES, Cold-Deck Carl had come back to the wild-cat city, and the scalp taken after a desperate encounter with Big Wolf the Sioux had secured him a goodly number of pardons, men who, as one of their number had put it, were ready to stand by him "through thick and thin."

The gambler-sport's chagrin at finding Hercules Goldspur absent from You-Bet was noticeable from the moment that Pigmy Pete made the announcement.

There was no cowardice in Carl's breast.

Despite Goldspur's velvet hands, he was not afraid of him; on the other hand, he burned to meet the giant who had thrown him half-senseless into the midst of the Indian band with the hope that they would make short work of him.

But he had turned the tables on his giant adversary.

The quickly coined but adroit lie about the silver bonanza of which he did not possess a foot had proved too much for Big Wolf's cupidity, and secured his release from the Indians as has been already seen.

He had come back to You-Bet with the same purpose that had first turned his face toward that place.

His pard killed in the gulch along the railroad track by a man known to the reader to be Zoe's father had thrown him upon his own resources, hence his determination to draw a "blood-line about the place."

We know that years before the date of our story Zoe had been abducted from her home in Arizona.

She was at the time a babe in the cradle, but the crime was as great as if she had been on the threshold of womanhood.

Indians had not taken the child, as had been supposed, but the hand of a white man Sutter's rival and enemy had planned and carried out the scheme.

The rancher's heavy reward for the return of his daughter and the scalp of the Indian supposed to have committed the crime availed not; long trails and thrilling adventures no more than to be reverted to here.

Ferdinand Sutter passed sleepless nights and weary days on various trails.

He enlisted good scouts and frontier detectives in his service; but they failed to clear up the mystery that surrounded Zoe's disappearance.

It was a hunt of years, a long, weary, endless chase after something that ever seemed to elude him and his men.

At last there came a message from two of his hunters.

It came not from the haunt of the lawless Apache, nor from the dens of the mountain outlaws of the southern frontier.

It came from the depths of the illimitable Northwest, recently crossed by the iron track of the Northern Pacific, and, roused by the hope its misspelled words contained, the father turned his face toward the mountains of Idaho.

Reader, that message came from Pigmy Pete and Lola the Mexican, two of his tireless hunters, and persons in whom the Arizonian reposed much confidence.

Had they really discovered the lost daughter? or were they only on a trail that might prove another delusion?

Ferdinand Sutter had finally given up the Indian theory.

He believed that his child had been taken from him by a man whom he well knew, a man whom he hated and who hated him.

When, therefore, Pigmy Pete sent him word that he had learned that a girl called Zoe was living at You-Bet protected among its lawless people by a white man he believed that he had tracked his arch enemy down.

The same night that brought Sutter to the Idaho town had also brought another man to the same place.

The red light on the railroad track had stopped a train and enabled the colonel to rejoin his confederate Cold-Deck Carl just outside the town.

He, the father, witnessed the meeting in the gulch.

He saw the two pards face to face, heard Cold-Deck Carl divulge his discoveries and listened, for a moment only, to the other's expressions of joy.

He listened until he could no longer stay his hand.

There stood before him the author of years of anguish, the maker of long trails, the robber of his home, the abductor of the ranch's heir.

He saw in a flash that the robber himself had been robbed, and that the two men in the gulch were hunting the same prize he sought—Zoe.

Cold-Deck Carl was the colonel's pard and spy.

When Sutter stepped toward the two men, a rifle struck his shoulder.

He saw his target in the red light still burning on the track, and for him to see was to make sure his revenge.

When the avenging finger pressed the trigger

there was, as we already know, a death-gurgle, and the man who reeled from Cold-Deck Carl fell dead at the threshold of another success!

As if satisfied with his revenge the Arizonian turned away leaving the gambler-sport to send forth threatenings of revenge.

Better, perhaps, had it been if he had finished the work begun in the railroad gulch, if he had stretched Cold-Deck Carl beside his master.

Then the mountain sport would not have come back to You Bet to win twenty bronze friends by the display of a bloody scalp, and to swear anew to carry out the plans of the dead pard buried on the hillside.

The eyes of Cold-Deck Carl fairly beamed with triumph when he took in the extent of his scalp-bought victory.

"I may need these fellows some time. I've bought 'em cheap," he said to himself. "I've clipped the Happy Rattler's feathers with a few Injun hairs."

He glanced contemptuously, as he finished, at the Rattler and his donkey, who occupied one corner of the den, and then invited the crowd up to the bar.

It was Cold-Deck's triumph, and he had resolved to follow it up.

Watching his opportunity, the Man from Silver Bow seized the muddy bridle of his pard and led him toward the door.

His glance at Cold-Deck Carl was full of anger, but he did not speak, but slipped so quietly from the place that the hilarious party at the new bar did not notice his departure.

"You an' me ag'in 'em all, George," he said to his donkey. "Wal, ef we ain't up ter snuff thar never war pards that war. Got new friends by totin' the scalp back, didn't he, my beau ideal? Wonder how long he'll keep 'em? I'd like ter see 'em tried; hang me ef I wouldn't."

The Happy Rattler stopped suddenly as he finished the last sentence.

"I'm hyar fer a time an' I might ez well hev it," he went on. "I'll try them new pards o' his'n. Happy Rattler, ef you let Cold-Deck Carl buy twenty pards with one Injun scalp, an' don't try their mettle, you'd better let George kick yer ter death. Come, my daisy; we ar' goin' back."

He turned and walked back toward the place he had lately left, but all at once Kicking George craned his neck forward and seized his master's jacket in his teeth.

"What! don't want ter go, eh?" ejaculated the Rattler, as the animal planted his fore-feet firmly on the ground, and exhibited some firmness of purpose. "Mebbe ye've got more sense than yer pard, George; but ef this jacket bu'sts I'm goin' back."

Then the Man from Silver Bow started forward with a jerk, and the next second he landed on all-fours on the ground some distance away, the piece of dirty cloth between the mule's teeth showing plainly the result of the wrench.

"It's a bad omen, but it's 'go' just ther same," he went on, picking himself up. "George, will yer go back on an old pard? We've got ter keep up ther reputation ov Silver Bow, an' we kin do it best together."

When he started off again the donkey was at his heels, as if he had given over his efforts to keep him out of danger, and the two pards approached the drinking-den.

As the night was warm the door of the trap seldom shut at any time, stood wide open, and a malicious twinkle lighted up the Happy Rattler's eyes as a certain voice reached his ears from within.

"We'll try ther friendship ov ther new pards," he laughed, and a minute afterward put one foot on Joe's threshold.

The crowd he had left but a few moments before was still at the bar, listening to Cold-Deck Carl's narration of his fight with Big Wolf.

The Happy Rattler heard him for a moment, and then his voice was heard above the laugh that supplemented the gambler-sport's story.

"Hyar we ar', ther beauty-spots ov Silver Bow!" he vociferated. "Up with yer hands, every mother's son ov ye. George kin kick, but I kin shoot. My sweet-Williams ov Idaho, ther Happy Rattler bez ther drop on ye all."

Was it wonderful that the men who heard this voice, and turned to confront the two pards in the doorway, recoiled from the two revolvers that grinned in their faces?

As for Cold-Deck Carl, he threw one hand toward the weapon on his hip, but the quick glance of the Rattler caught the movement.

"Draw an' die, Cold-Deck!" he said coolly, so coolly that the gambler-sport's weapon was not drawn. "Ther rat that falls inter ther well sometimes gits out. That's why I'm hyar. Oh, I'm no slouch when it comes ter providential escapes. Ther chap from Silver Bow, backed by a pard what kin kick a mine-shaft ter pieces, isn't an infant by a long shot. Touch ther dropper, Cold-Deck, an' I'll set these pistols ter laughin' in dead earnest. Want ther gal, don't yer? Want Zoe an' all o' ther bonanza ye kin get, eh? Thar's subthin' between you an' success—my revolvers an' Kickin' George's back!"

Some of the men smiled faintly at this some-

what bombastic wind-up; but Cold-Deck Carl saw no merriment in the effort.

"Come out on one side or t'other, men ov You-Bet!" continued the Rattler. "Stand by me er Cold-Deck. Give a man a show in this wild cat's den. Ef yer friendship kin be purchased with an Injun's scalp, it's durned scrubby timber. Will ye stand it? It's an impertation on yer honor. Who ar' ye fer now—Cold-Deck er You-Bet?"

There was a moment's silence, and then as a loud voice shouted "Fer You-Bet!" a dozen men came toward the Rattler.

"That's bizness!" he said. "Now, Cold-Deck, hold up yer hands."

The command was accompanied by a look that was full of fire, and as Cold-Deck Carl raised his hands with the doggedness of an outlaw brought to bay, one of the Rattler's revolvers spoke.

With a wild, hoarse cry of pain the gambler sport went backward, his face livid, his eyes flashing fire.

"Hold!" shouted the Happy Rattler as a stride carried him toward the men who had remained at Cold-Deck Carl's side. "I guess I've got the biggest squad on my side. I'll kill ther first turtle-dove thet draws a pistol. Thar's the man I want. Pard o' mine, ef you mean ter maintain ther honor ov You-Bet, seize Cold-Deck-Carl and tie him to my donkey's tail."

The men addressed by the Rattler started toward the sport, who had fallen to his knees; but the next moment his hand shot forward and the foremost desperado staggered back with a cry and fell dead at the donkey's feet!

CHAPTER XIV.

A LIAR'S OATH.

THE death-shot was fired by Cold-Deck Carl, who would have met a like fate if some of his new-found pards had not rushed between him and the Rattler's revolver.

For a few moments bloodier work was threatened, but all at once Kicking George rushed between the two parties and elevated his heels in a manner that put an end to the disturbance.

As for Cold-Deck Carl, he glided behind the counter, and at the first opportunity slipped through a door that stood handy and ajar, and found himself alone with a limp and bleeding arm under the stars a few yards from the den.

"Shot!—winged by that infernal dead-beat from Silver Bow!" he grated, in no good humor, as he glanced at his arm and then sent a mad look toward the saloon. "Won't I get even with him, though? I was about ter drop him when thet mule took a hand in ther melee an' scattered the crowd. The Rattler owes his life to his pard, but I'll cancel ther debt afore long. Wal, I'm back just too late, they say. Hercules Goldspur is gone—ran off with Zoe!"

Cold Deck Carl took a quick, mad step toward the gambling-den, as it about to seek it again to try conclusions with the Happy Rattler, but wiser and cooler mental counsel quickly intervened, for he turned suddenly on his heel and walked away.

With his crippled arm hanging at his side, he hurried toward the north side of the town, where the mines were; but stopped suddenly near the first shaft, for a figure had risen in his path, and he found himself face to face with a magnificent-looking man whose hair and mustache were gray.

"I know you!" hissed Cold-Deck Carl. "You are Ferdinand Sutter, and the man who killed the colonel."

A smile on his confronter's part said "I am the man."

Cold-Deck Carl stepped back a pace and looked into the piercing gray eyes of Zoe's father.

"Why didn't you drop me, too?" he exclaimed. "I war at your mercy."

"One at a time; the worst one first," was the answer. "Y's, I killed your pard. God knows I have hunted him long enough."

"But the shot didn't give you Zoe."

"No," in tones of disappointment. "It took your companion's life, but it did not give me my child."

"Don't you think you dropped ther wrong man?" and Cold-Deck Carl smiled as he finished. "A bullet in Goldspur's head might have proved a bonanza for ye."

For a moment Sutter did not speak.

"Don't question me!" he suddenly cried.

"Where is that blood-line you were going to draw around You-Bet? You and the villain I killed were pards. His mission has become yours. He wanted the girl called Zoe. He robbed me of her years ago, and so adroitly that I thought the deed was committed by Indians. Not until lately was I led to suspect the truth. When I killed your friend I knew I had struck the right trail at last. Like yourself, I struck You-Bet to-night too late to find Hercules Goldspur and my child. Who is he? You know, Cold-Deck Carl, and as Zoe's father I ask you!"

A strange smile wreathed Carl's lips for a moment.

"He is the man who took Zoe from the man you shot," he said, at length. "It was ten years ago. He came an' went in the night, like a wolf—made no trail an' did not kill. We have

been huntin' him an' the girl ever since. When I found them hyar I sent word by telegraph to ther colonel, an' he came on ter be shot by you. It's very simple. Wal, he'll never carry out his plans. I planted him."

"But you are left!" and Sutter took a step toward the gambler-sport. "What are you going to do?"

The question so direct admitted of no equivocation.

"Oh, I'm winged. Got the compliments ov ther Rattler from Silver Bow in my arm," and Cold-Deck Carl held out his wounded arm toward Sutter. "He shoots an' laughs, thet dead-beat does. It's all ther same ter him. What am I goin' ter do? Why, wait till my arm mends an' then separate ther pards from Silver Bow!"

His eyes flashed while he spoke.

"But that is not it. What do I care for the quarrel between you and the Happy Rattler?" said Sutter. "You have declared that the colonel's plans are now your plans. I know what his were—to get possession of Zoe and with her in his power to extort money from me, and to heap upon years of angust more torture than the human heart can bear. Are your plans the same that his were? Answer me, Cold-Deck Carl. I am Zoe's father."

"Your girl is nothin' ter me," he said, in a tone calculated to deceive. "I liked ther colonel. Me an' him hev been pards a long time, but I didn't steal Zoe, because I warn't with 'im then. I met him after that. I stayed with him because we made a certain agreement, an' then I got ter likin' him. But he's dead now, an' I'm bound ter no man."

Sutter looked deep into the eyes of Cold-Deck Carl, who thus continued:

"Ef you'll look at my arm, an' help me see how badly ther dead-beat from Silver Bow winged me, mebbe you and I could be friends. You've got ter find Hercules Goldspur—that's a hard, cold fact—an' when you've found him he'll prove no infant ter handle."

Without replying, Sutter made a gesture which indicated that he was willing to look at Cold-Deck Carl's wound, and with some difficulty the arm was bared for inspection.

In the soft moonlight that bathed the spot in weird beauty, the two men looked at the wound inflicted by the Rattler's bullet, which might have taken Carl's life if the jolly man had been so disposed.

It was found to be an ugly wound, the ball having cracked if not broken the bone in its course, and though the slightest movement caused Carl indescribable pain, he laughed derisively as he held the arm above his head.

"By George! Sutter, I'm a winged pigeon, ain't I?" he exclaimed. "Broken wings heal sometimes, and the bird flies as well as ever. It's my best arm; but what ov it? I'll live ter kill ther Silver Bow dog with it! He'll cuss before he dies the day he only winged Cold Deck Carl. I'll live ter pay 'im back. I'll live ter help you in anything. Colonel Sutter. Say ther word, an' Cold Deck Carl steps ter yer side as ag'in' Hercules Goldspur, whose greatest boast is that he is The Man ov ther Velvet Hand. Ef you want me, hyar I am! Ef necessary, we two will draw a blood-line about this wild-cat's den that'll make it a noted place. Thanks! You've dressed wounds afore. I know ye hev."

"Several times," smiled Sutter, looking into Carl's face. "I do want to find my child, and you say that where she is I will find this Hercules Goldspur?"

"I do."

"Then I will hunt him."

"Alone?"

"Not if you hate him enough to go with me."

"Me hate him? You ar' talkin' now!" exclaimed Carl. "Who wouldn't hate the man what choked 'im first an' then tossed 'im among a lot ov red wolves? Yes, I like Hercules Goldspur, but we'll never become pards, colonel. It's ag'in' ther grain."

"Then, sir, we'll hunt him together."

Cold-Deck Carl held out his hand.

"Yours truly, Colonel Sutter," he said. "We ar' pards now that'll make things hum in certain localities. Hercules Goldspur, you'll be called ter account afore long an' in a manner that will be talked about. Zoe shall be restored to your arms. I, Cold-Deck Carl, a man-tiger from the best fightin' district in Colorado, swears it in yer presence!"

Sutter returned the grip in a way which told that he had trusted the man who had just registered on high an oath to help him recover his child.

And this Cold Deck Carl was the companion of the enemy he had just slain, and he had come to You-Bet with a far different purpose than the one to which he had just sworn allegiance.

"Stand by me and you shall never regret it," said Sutter. "I have another friend here and he will help us."

"An' that friend is—"

"Pigmy Pete!"

A slight sneer of derision appeared at the corners of Carl's mouth.

"Hal you know him?" said Sutter.

"Wal, I oughter, seein' that we met last night," was the reply. "His gal left him—"

went off after Hercules Goldspur. She's a bluffer, colonel. Your friend, too?"

"Yes."

"Do you think she's squar'?"

"Faithful do you mean?"

"Yes. Do you think those Greaser eyes ov hers will never go back on yer?"

"I'll vouch for Lola," said Sutter quickly. "The diamonds with which she bluffed you last night belong to me, but one of these times—at the end of my life-trail—they'll be hers. But we must strike the giant's trail. Where he is there is my child! Can you start at the end of an hour?"

"You'll find me ready then."

"Then meet me here. Your arm will heal while we hunt. You will not settle with the Happy Rattler to-night?"

"Not unless they force me to."

"They'll not do that."

"Very well, then. The two pards from Silver Bow shall not be separated just yet."

Sutter smiled and drew back.

"In one hour. Remember!" he said.

"I'll be hyar."

Half a minute later Cold-Deck Carl found himself alone, and with a curious look he followed Zoe's father with his eyes until his figure was visible no longer.

"Fool!" he suddenly hissed, and the epithet was followed by a sarcastic laugh. "I did not think you could be hoodwinked so easily, Ferd Sutter. I have been too long with the colonel to forget him an' swar honest allegiance to ther man what wiped him out without a purpose. Go back an' git ready fer ther trail thet leads ter Hercules Goldspur. I will foller it with yer. Fool! I will be on hand when that trail ends. But you shall never take Zoe back to ther Arizona ranch without ther full consent ov Cold-Deck Carl. Ther ar' buzzards in Idaho, an' they may pick your bones, fool!"

His bitter words died away, and as he walked from the spot leaving it deserted, a low, coarse laugh tremoled the air.

"Fool!" mocked the laughter who looked over the back of a donkey. "Ye ar' ther biggest fool ov the two, Cold-Deck Carl. We'll see whose bones them birds will pick."

CHAPTER XV.

ROBBED.

"WELL, Zoe, how do you like your new home?"

"I have not got used to it yet," and the dark-eyed beauty smiled faintly as she looked up into the face of the giant who stood in the doorway of the mountain cabin many miles from You-Bet.

"I wonder if they're lookin' for us? What do you think, Zoe?"

"There is one man who will not leave the trail soon."

"Your father?"

"Yes."

"Ef I hadn't flung Cold-Deck Carl to the Indians thar'd be another persistent trailer. I guess we're safe hyer—for a time, at least. This shanty I found long ago in one ov my rambles from You-Bet an' I said then: 'Ef they ever make the city too hot for Zoe, I'll fetch 'er hyer.' They've made it too hot for ye, an' you ar' hyer accordin' ter promise."

Of course the man in the door was Hercules Goldspur, athletic and handsome as ever, and his eyes glowed with triumphant delight as he looked down upon the girl he had brought to the cabin in the mountain by a trail which he thought the keen eyes of the Indian tracker could not detect.

His fight with the Indians in the pass soon after his flight from You Bet while it had given him a wound now nearly healed had already passed from his mind, and he was ready to meet those against whom for the beautiful creature who shared with him the cabin he had pitted himself.

"Not for all the gold in these hills will I surrender Zoe till I'm ready," he said to himself. "They may hunt us down, but I will show my trackers that I am still The Man of the Velvet Hand. Ferd Sutter, you can't have your daughter. I have said no."

The last word had scarcely left his lip ere Zoe came forward, and her hand fell softly upon his arm while she looked into his face.

"The are two hunters whom you have forgotten," she said.

"Name 'em, Zoe."

"Pigmy Pete and Lola."

Instantly Hercules Goldspur broke into a laugh.

"Them two children!" he cried. "Why, I could hold Pigmy out at arm's length an' choke 'im at my leisure."

"But Lola?"

"A Mexican snake, with ther purtiest eyes in ther world except yours, Zoe!" he exclaimed. "Why do you think they will hunt us?"

"Because they are working for my father."

"His spies, do you say, Zoe? By Heavens! I wish I had known that when I interfered between Cold-Deck an' Pigmy."

"A word, afterward dropped by Lola, told me all."

"Then, let them keep their distance!" cried

Hercules. "I wish I could tell ther hull Northwest thet I'm goin' ter keep Zoe Sutter until I choose ter give her up. Ef I hev ever insulted her in any form let her say so, and Hercules Goldspur will make amends. I love too well the woman I protect to make her blush. I will stand by the girl I took from Colonel Dasher an' his pard. Notbin' parts us, Zoe. Let the trackers come—I am hyar! When you go back to the old ranch you go there as my wife, ef your love does not find a better man before that time."

The girl smiled till she showed her pearly teeth, and the giant threw one arm around her and snatched a kiss from her forehead.

"Do you know that I dreamed again last night that I saw men on the trail above our cabin?" she said.

"Always dreamin'!" the giant laughed.

"One ov these times there will be men up thar," and he glanced up at the darkening mountain that loomed above the hut.

"Do you think so?"

"Why not, if you dream it all the time?" was the laughing reply. "I will go up and see; they may be there now."

Zoe was in a mood to remonstrate, but the giant was too quick for that, and she was alone in the mountain hut before she fairly recovered from his sudden departure.

"I love him, and yet he drags me from my father," said the girl. "What kind of a man is Ferdinand Sutter? I have no recollection of him, and yet he wants to claim me as his daughter. Why doesn't Hercules go to him and say, 'I know where your child is—I can restore her to your arms?' But no; he makes me fly from my father—he hurries me from You-Bet because that father seeks me. When will it end?"

Zoe went back into the cabin, and saw the shadows of night wrap it in gloom again.

A week had passed since her forced flight from the mushroom city by the railroad, and yet her retreat had not been discovered.

She did not know that Lola, the Mexican girl, had set out on the trail she had made; she had not heard the oath taken in Pigmy Pete's presence, nor witnessed the bond of friendship given by Cold-Deck Carl to the man who had come from Arizona to find her.

If she had been cognizant of these events, she might have watched the gathering shadows with some forebodings of impending evil.

Night after night, Hercules Goldspur had watched the trails that led to the hut.

He was guarding zealously the fair creature whom he loved, and for whom he was ready to use his revolver and his silken fingers.

"At last!" ejaculated a voice among some bushes as Hercules went up to the trails again. "I told Pigmy that I would find them, and I have kept my word. What's a week's hunt when I serve the man I love! What's a year's trailing when it leads me to happiness?"

A pair of glistening eyes looked through the thick bushes at the cabin occupied now by Zoe alone.

There was triumph in every lineament of the face, nut-brown in color, but strikingly handsome.

"Gone, is he? He's left the prize at home, but he would not have done so, if he knew that I was so near. Ah! Hercules! I do not fear your velvet hand. It will never close on my throat, and I will never stand before your leveled revolver. I'll go up and see Zoe."

Ten minutes later, when she had given The Man of the Velvet Hand time to get a goodly distance from the cabin, the speaker left her hiding-place, and crept forward.

"My horse will carry double," she said. "Hercules, when you come back to the nest you will find the bird—your bird—gone."

It was a short distance from her secret place to the door of the mountain hut, and the tracker, whom the reader has already called Lola, reached it without, not having, by the slightest noise betrayed her presence to the person inside.

For a moment she crouched at the door ajar, and listened with glittering eyes.

Her breath came and went like the breath of the tigress that listens to the step of the spotted fawn.

All at once she rose and stepped across the threshold of the cabin.

The next second there was a startled cry, and Lola sprung toward the girl, who recoiled from her.

"Not a word, Zoe! It is I—Lola!" she said, in quick tones, as her fingers encircled Zoe's wrist. "I have found you at last. Thank Heaven! He thought he had carried you to a home which could not be found out. But he forgot me. He never thought of Lola, Pigmy Pete's girl pard. Why did he forget me, Zoe?"

Zoe could not speak for astonishment.

"You must come with me," Lola went on.

"With you?" ejaculated Zoe.

"Yes, I came for you."

"Whither will you take me?"

"Back to your father."

Zoe gave a gasping cry.

"You shall go!" cried Lola. "I have sworn it, and Lola never breaks her oath. I laugh at

Hercules Goldspur's velvet hands. I hate him because he has baffled me. To your father! Hesitate, Zoe, and I may leave you dead for him to find when he comes back."

With the last words madly spoken the Mexican huntress clapped a revolver to Zoe's head and hissed over the polished barrel.

"Oh, I sha'n't hesitate to kill if you resist! I am going back to your father with a report of some kind. Will you go alive, Zoe?"

The menacing weapon would have decided the most stubborn.

Zoe stared down the barrel for a moment, and then glanced at the girl who held it.

"I will go," she said in low tones.

Lola laughed.

"I said to myself that I would rob the mountain nest," she said. "When Hercules comes back won't he swear? But we will not hear him, Zoe, for we will be far away. Come. We go now."

Still clutching her captive's wrist, Lola led the way from the cabin.

Her eyes fairly blazed.

The Mexican huntress was in her element. She led Zoe down the mountain trail and into a little copse in the middle of which the two came suddenly upon a horse which instantly recognized Lola.

"He'll carry double, Zoe," she laughed. "Let me help you up."

A moment later Goldspur's love was firmly seated on the animal, and an agile spring placed Lola on the same perch.

"Now, Hercules, choke me if you can!" she exclaimed. "I have robbed you of Zoe, your little pard, and I'm ready to defend the prize I've taken."

Then Lola spoke to the steed which started forward, and in less time than five minutes he had cleared the thicket, and was in a comparatively open trail.

The capture and abduction had not occupied more time than ten minutes, but the horse carrying the two girls was already far from the spot.

All at once a figure appeared in the starlight in front of the mountain cabin, and the next instant a man crossed the threshold.

"Zoe—Zoe! Your dream is a fraud!" he laughed, but ceased suddenly and started back.

"She's gone!" rung in mad accents from his throat. "Woe to the man or woman who robbed me of Zoe! I am a tiger, as men have found out, when I'm roused. She didn't desert me of her own accord. No; somebody has been here!"

He drew a match from his pocket, struck it against the cabin-wall, and moved it over the ground beyond the door.

Suddenly he sprang up, and dashed the match to the ground.

"She leaves a trail, the Mexican viper!" he hissed. "Her throat just fits my hand. She has followed us all the way from You Bet. Zoe asked me to-night if I did not fear her an' Pigmy Pete, an' I laughed an' said 'No.' Zeknew more than I did about that yaller tracker. Wal, Zoe's dream warn't such a fraud, arter all!"

He went back into the shanty, but came forth again a moment later.

"Outwitted by a Mexican gal! By George, Mr. Goldspur, don't yer feel like sellin' out dirt cheap? She's workin' fer Ferd Satter. She will take Zoe back to her father, if I let 'er; but mebbe I'll be mean enough ter block her game. Shouldn't wonder ef I did. Robbed of Zoe! I have sworn that nobody should ever do this, but hyar I am at last—alone—Zoe gone—tricked by Pigmy Pete's gal pard!"

He laughed derisively at himself at the end of the last sentence, and while the tones yet vibrated on the air, he sprang down the mountain-side with a tigerish eagerness to strike Lola's trail.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE HAPPY RATTLERS' CAMP.

LOLA the Mexican was proud of her prize. More than once she glanced furtively, yet with eyes full of triumph at Zoe, and thought of the reward she had fixed her mind on.

As for Zoe herself, she remained silent until the horse reached a small stream, some miles from the cabin, and lowered his head to drink.

"What does my father look like?" she asked, no longer able out of curiosity to keep back the question.

"Ah, he is handsome!" exclaimed Lola. "Tall and straight as an arrow, with the eye of an eagle, and the strength of a grizzly. He would make any woman proud of him. Such is your father, Zoe."

"When did you first meet him?"

"Long ago. He came to me and said: 'I want you to help me find my child. Pigmy Pete will help you; I have engaged him.' But I would have helped your father without any thought of reward. I like handsome men, but that is not why I am Pete's pard," and Lola laughed.

"Pigmy and I are friends, but we will not always be," she went on. "This hunt for you, Zoe, is going to tear us apart. Ah! if Pete

turns on me as he will when a certain event takes place, he will hate the girl he loves now."

"I do not understand you," said Zoe.

"Mebbe not, but you will," was the quick response. "Ah! what a handsome man your father is, Zoe!"

Zoe's eyes watched Lola for several minutes after her last exclamation but she did not speak.

The horse was quenching his thirst in the starlit stream, and Lola's eyes were burning brilliantly for her comment on Ferdinand Sutter's manly beauty.

"He is beyond this stream!" exclaimed Lola. "I long to meet him. I am eager to give him back his daughter."

The horse left the water and plunged on.

Suddenly there rung out upon the clear air a voice that drew a cry from Zoe's lips and made Lola draw rein and revolver.

"Halt an' hold up, pard!" said the voice. "It's my first attempt ter play road-agent, but I've got ter stop ye."

"I ought to know that voice," said Zoe to herself. "I have certainly heard it before."

Lola with her finger at the trigger of her weapon was leaning forward, trying to make out the person who had stopped her so suddenly.

"Is it hold up er a tumble, my beau ideal?" continued the man. "I can't stand hyar all night, an' George ar' rayther impatient ter kick suthin'."

Lola uttered an exclamation which told Zoe that she had identified the man.

"It's hold up till I get the drop on him," she grated in tones heard only by her prisoner. "I will never be the captive of that reptile from Silver Bow."

Then she thrust her revolver back into the pocket from which it had been taken and her hands went up over her head.

"That's sensible, my cherub!" exclaimed the Happy Rattler. "Jes' keep yer paws elevated till I hev taken a squint at yer size." And the two girls saw the speaker ride toward them.

"Jehosaphat! a double catch!" fell from his lips as he stopped with a coarse "whoa!" alongside of Lola's steed. "I war born in a good sign an' cut my eye teeth on ther luckiest day ov ther year. Two on 'em! Rattler, ye'r no disgrace ter Silver Bow. You an' George ar' its most distinguished representatives. Goin' back ter You-Bet?"

Lola's eyes flashed madly but her lips moved not.

"Mad, eh? You ar' sweetest when you frown, my poutin' pard," laughed the Rattler. "Ef I can't git a word out ov one, I'll try the other. Which way, Zoe?"

"Lola says to my father," was the reply that drew a quick glance from the Mexican.

"Ter Ferd Sutter? I know 'im," said the man from Silver Bow. "I'll take charge ov you, Zoe."

Lola drew back with a light cry.

"You?" she cried, glaring at the Happy Rattler. "You rob me of Zoe? Never!"

"Oh, yes, my honey-bee," laughed the man. "I'm a wild-cat with his ha'r smoothed ther wrong way when I git riled. Sha'n't hev Zoe, eh? Wal, we'll see."

He leaned toward the girls as he finished, and his bronzed hand was stretched forward to take Zoe.

"You shall not!" exclaimed Lola, throwing one arm around her captive as the other darted toward her revolver. "I am not going to be robbed by you!"

"By jingol by nobody elsel" was the quick reply. "Look down inter this an' photograph yer face on cold lead" and a revolver of the largest caliber was thrust into Lola's face. "I laugh, but I also shoot. Yes, I'll take Zoe."

The Mexican looked over the gleaming barrel of the revolver.

"Durn me, ef I don't mean bizness," the Rattler hissed. "I'd ez soon spoil your face as look at it. Lift yer shoe in' iron, Lola, an' the gentleman from Silver Bow 'll send you ter yer grave a maid. Shall I hev the gal?"

Lola's arm reluctantly left Zoe's waist, and the next moment the Happy Rattler had transferred her to the back of his donkey.

"Ride on ter You Bet an' report thet owin' ter circumstances ye could not control, Zoe didn't come along," grinned the Rattler. "Go back an' bury yer disappointment on Pigmy's bosom. Don't stay in these parts, ez ther climate may prove unhealthy. Move along, George!"

The donkey started forward, but Lola's eyes followed his master, and her lips madly exclaimed:

"Coward! thief! devil! what are you goin' to do with Zoe?"

"That's a conundrum!" was the harsh, laughing rejoinder. "Hang me ef it would stump Silver Bow fer a solid week. What am I going to do with this daisy jumper ov ther mountains? I ben't exactly decided. Thief, eh? Wal, mebbe I did steal Zoe from ye; but who did you rob, hey, my honey?"

"A braver man than you will ever be!" cried Lola.

"That's yer opinion, not ther Happy Rattler's. But we must part. I regret ter hev ter inform you, Lola, thet this 'ere partin' grieves

my very heart. My constant prayer will be thet we will meet ag'in—"

"We will!" flashed the Mexican. "The vengeance of Lola will overtake you."

"Thanks! Ef you don't find me soon jes' advertise. I'm ther Happy Rattler ov Silver Bow, an' this distinguished person is Kickin' George, Esquire, ov ther same locality."

A dig in the donkey's ribs sent him forward again and Lola the Mexican was left alone on the mountain captiveless and almost beside herself with rage and chagrin.

She heard the clatter of the donkey's hoofs mingled with the coarse laugh with which the Rattler had supplemented his last sentence.

"Robbed! robbed by the meanest man in Idaho!" fell from her lips. "I will never go back to Ferdinand until I can make my own terms, and without Zoe I cannot name them."

She wheeled her horse in the direction toward which the Happy Rattler had ridden, but did not urge him forward.

"I guess you'd better not foller!" was the admonition that came suddenly from the darkness. "I knowed a feller once thet run ag'in six inches ov round steel and never backed off either."

She well knew it was the Happy Rattler's voice, and its effect was such as to make her keep her place, and let him depart with his prisoner.

"He'll run against Hercules Goldspur. I hope he will!" she cried. "A man that laughs is, of all men, the most dangerous. He shoots while he laughs. Take Zoe back to The Man of The Velvet Hand. I can rob him again. Oh, I am not going to be baffled because you have robbed me, Rattler. I will soon re-arm myself with the weapon that will bring Ferdinand Sutter to terms."

She did not move until the Rattler's cutting laugh and his donkey's hoof-beats had ceased to salute her ears.

Then she turned her horse's head toward You-Bet, and rode slowly and thoughtfully down the trail.

"By hokey! you left You Bet too soon," said the Rattler to Zoe when he had put a mile and more between himself and Lola. "They've bed times thar since ye left. One little shootin'-match an' a reg'lar Injun raid. My mountain posey, it war a time."

Zoe's look was a question but her lips did not unclose.

"Them red devils came down on ther place when nobody war lookin' fer 'em," the Rattler went on. "It war three nights arter Cold-Deck Carl came back an' made a lot ov new par with Big Wolf's scalp."

"What!" exclaimed Zoe. "Is that gam sport alive?"

"He war at last accounts. Not only alive but yer father's pard."

Zoe started and shuddered.

"Cold-Deck Carl my father's friend?" she cried to herself. "That means something. Ah! It means that I must ever hate that man."

"But let me go back ter ther Injun raid. Jehu! them greasy devils came down on You-Bet like a cataract. It war suthin' awful. Portland Express hed jes' left when thar war a yell, an' Joe's place war full ov red skins before a man could draw his dropper. All ther Injuns in Idaho wouldn't hev made more racket, an' I guess they war all thar. Thar war some fightin', but not much. What thar war war done by ther reds. The next stranger thet comes ter You-Bet will hunt a long time fer a drink."

The Happy Rattler supplemented his last remark with a significant grin and a far-away look which did not escape the girl's eye.

"They took the place by storm!" she said.

"I should remark ter mention," was the answer. "If I war foot-loose an' ov a speculative turn, I'd go back thar an' take a mibe. Them Injuns, ter be plain, Zoe, didn't leave a snudgin' ov livin' anatomy in You-Bet. Thar war a few chaps what got away, but Joe's war a first-class morgue when ther reds left. I've heard ov clean-outs, my robin, but it war ther cleanest one I ever inspected. Joe, an' nearly all got it, and all because Cold-Deck Carl came back an' waved Big Wolf's ha'r over his head. He'll never do it again in You-Bet."

"They killed Cold-Deck, then?"

"Hardly. Didn't I lately remark that be an' yer father ar' pards? They're together somewhere. Zoe, you must learn to hate that man. He's a traitor to yer father. I heard ther bad agreement. He's promised ter help find you, but he's got a purpose in view, ther mean shuck! You ar' a blazed sight safer with Hercules Goldspur, ef I don't like 'im, than you are with yer father while Cold-Deck Carl ar' his pard. But you are safest with the honorable gentlemen from Silver Bow."

There was a good natured but somewhat aversive twinkle in the Rattler's eyes as he spoke, but Zoe saw only the former.

"We could be friends," she said.

"We're in ter ter. Everybody in this wild country has a game ov his own ter play. I hev mine, an' since I've found you, Zoe, I've taken a trick I hardly looked fer. About what do yer think Ferd Sutter is worth?"

"My father? I don't know."

"More'n a million, they say," was the answer. "It's too much for one man to hev, my daisy jumper. Thar's goin' ter be a divv one o' these days, an' ef I keep ther hand I hold at this time, I'll be thar when it's made."

Zoe looked into his face and then recoiled with a shudder of disgust.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE "SNAKE" COLD-DECK SHOT.

THE Happy Rattler had not exaggerated to Zoe the descent of the red-skins upon You-Bet.

Like a whirlwind that spares nothing in the path of its fury, the Indians came and went, leaving behind evidences of red-skin rage and vengeance.

It was true also that some of the roughs effected their escape, and it chanced that for the most part they were men whose friendship Cold-Deck Carl had won by the display of the very trophy that had called forth the swoop of the red eagles—the scalp of Big Wolf.

It was a wonder that the victors had not applied the match to the wooden shanties after their swoop, but the fact that it was an important station on the Northern Pacific was all that saved the town.

Had it been situated away from the railroad the glare of its burning would have illuminated the midnight sky.

On the very night that witnessed Zoe's capture by the rough from Silver Bow, there was a re-union among the mountains that brightened the eyes of at least one man, a tall black-eyed fellow who still carried his arm in a sling.

"What! You-Bet cleaned out?" exclaimed this individual staring at the seven dark-shirted men who had surprised him at a camp-fire.

"Blamed ef it ain't a fact, Cold-Deck," was the answer. "Th-y came down on us like a flock of eagles. Ef more than we seven got away with bull hides we don't know it. Thar's jes' enough ov us ter form a kind o' avengin' brotherhood—a band ov free an' easy chaps thet will make a name an' money. Take us in, Cold-Deck. We're ther pards you won when you flouted Big Wolf's scalp in our faces. Thet scalp made ther reds come ter You-Bet; but what ov thet?"

There were seven stalwart dark-faced men capable of desperate deeds either singly or under the leadership of a man in whom they trusted.

"What d'ye say, Carl! Shall the brotherhood exist?"

Cold-Deck Carl did not speak until he had stepped to the mouth of a cave in the hillside and listened there for a moment.

"Men ov You-Bet let the band exist," he said coming back to the seven fugitives from You-Bet.

"Ar' you alone, Cold-Deck?"

"No."

"Who's in ther cave?"

"A friend."

"The gal?"

"No."

"Will he join us?"

"I think not. He is on the trail himself."

"An' you war helpin' 'im?"

"Yes."

"Trot 'im out an' give him a chance ter join us."

"It would be folly. He would not join. Let him sleep."

"Jes' ez you say, then. Shall we organize hyar?"

"No. Follow me."

Cold-Deck Carl led the roughs from the light of the camp-fire and did not pause until in a little hollow some distance away, he whirled suddenly upon the seven.

"Thar ar' now eight of us!" exclaimed the spokesman of the seven. "By ther eternal heavens! this kentry shall think t'war ar' eight hundred afore long. To-morrow night we'll begin by makin' ther Portland passengers hold 'em."

"What!" cried Cold-Deck. "Is the object of the brotherhood to be robbery?"

"Kinder so." And the speaker placed his bronzed hands akimbo and laughed carseyly. "Thar hev'n't been a hold-up game played along hyar since ther road's been built. N body'll be lookin' for it. Thar'll be a rich haul, Cold-Deck, an' a divv that'll make you smile. Dare you be our chief? Dare you lead us in ther raid?"

Cold-Deck Carl thought of the man he had lately left in the hill side cavern, the hunting father he had sworn to help to the great success for which he longed.

Up to this moment he had played his game well.

Ferdinand Sutter had not suspected him of treachery, and he felt that he could not afford at this moment to desert him to lead a lot of desperadoes in an attack on a Northern Pacific train, when the chances of success were decidedly questionable.

"It looks like you halt between ther man in the hill an' yer pards from You-Bet!" said the rough as Carl hesitated. "We don't want that kind ov captain. Cold-Deck, we've struck ther

wrong man. Go back ter yer pard. Lie to 'im. You kin scalp Big Wolf, but you can't lead ther men ov You-Bet. Whar's yer grit?"

The eyes of the gambler-sport suddenly flashed. His courage was assailed.

"My grit doesn't suffer by your taunts," he hissed. "I'm no train-robber. Ef I have bluffed in games from Sacramento ter Dead-wood, I don't stoop to train-robbery. I am Cold-Deck Carl."

A derisive laugh followed this flashed response, and at a glance from their leader the roughs from You-Bet moved forward a pace.

"Ov course ye ar'," he said. "We ar' the men-wolves the reds spared. You won't lead us?"

"No."

"Then hold up yer hands an' sw'ar not ter betray us."

Cold-Deck Carl bit his lip.

"I'll never do that," he said under his breath.

"By the eternal stars! I will swear no oath of secrecy for these dead-beats."

He seemed to increase an inch in stature while he stood, without reply, to the last demand.

"Sw'ar, Cold-Deck! It's no more than fair, since we've told you what we're going to do. It's goin' ter be hold up on ther train to-morrow night."

"I'm no traitor!" suddenly roared the gambler-sport. "Go an' stop the train. I swear for no man."

"Not even fer us, Cold-Deck?"

"For no man, I say."

"Do you hear thet, boys?" cried the leader of the seven, wheeling upon his companions. "Shall we take Cold-Deck's word?"

"Make him hold up his hands an' talk."

"Hold 'em up, Cold-Deck."

"Never!"

Matters were fast approaching a crisis between Cold-Deck Carl and the toughs of plundered You-Bet.

His last word, firmly spoken, told the seven that they had cornered a man who would not move an inch.

They looked into the eye of the gambler-sport and read defiance there.

"Never, eh, Cold-Deck?" grinned the leader of the set. "You've got but one hand. We've got fourteen—a big percentage."

"No. I have two hands!" And the hand until that moment at rest in the sling leaped out, and in the twinkling of an eye the two revolvers on Cold Deck Carl's hips were drawn and cocked.

"Go an' rob the train," he continued; "but don't begin the game ov hold-up hyer."

The thunder struck seven recoiled from the revolvers that leaped forward.

"I swear no oath of silence fer any man. You've struck the wrong man, boys. You'll hev to organize ther brotherhood without me."

"I guess we kin do thet, Carl," was the answer. "You won't be with us to-morrow night, but we'll get along. Got ter do suthin' now; You-Bet's no good. Them infernal red-skins didn't leave a drop ov red-eye in ther hull town. Wasn't it strange? First came the man from Silver Bow an' hed Joe's counter kicked ter pieces; then ther reds came an' cleaned out ther hull place."

The speaker talked with Carl's revolvers staring him in the face.

He was a burly fellow, fully Cold-Deck's equal in physique, and he spoke, not the least concerned about the weapons at whose triggers rested the deadliest fingers in Idaho.

"We part hyer, as we can't quite agree," he went on. "We'll not exact ther oath to night."

Carl's look said "You'd better not try," and his pistols dropped at his side, but he did not move an inch.

Suddenly one of the seven pushed his way to the front, and, with a leer, said:

"She's makin' a long trail fer ye Cold-Deck."

"Pigmy Pete!" exclaimed the gambler-sport.

"I didn't see you till now."

"Oh, Big Burt thar hid me," laughed the little man, who looked dwarfed beside his athletic companions. "I'm little, but immense. Hevn't found 'er yet, I see?"

"Found war?"

"Oh, you know. Come, I know a few things, ef you an' Ferd did give me the slip t'other night. I am one of the few what left You-Bet because the reds came. With ther rest what got away, bizness called me away at the most important moment. Move along, boys. I hev a jug o' bizness with this man."

He stepped toward Cold-Deck Carl as he waved his companions off, and the following moment the dwarf and the gambler-sport were alone.

"I'd like ter see Ferd," said Pigmy Pete, looking up into Carl's face. "He's with you back yonder."

That instant the sport's face darkened, and he flashed the little man a look dire enough to make him recoil.

"Well, we'll go to him," he said, beating down his rage. "You want to see Ferd? Come. We didn't intend to desert you in You-Bet, Pigmy; but circumstances hastened our departure."

"Oh, I understand," said Pigmy Pete, with significance. "I knowed thet only important bizness would take him away without seein' me. Lola he couldn't have seen, for she war gone. An' you are his pard, Carl. Goin' ter help 'im find Zoe? I'm glad ov that. Give us yer hand, pard."

The hand of Cold-Deck Carl closed on the one the little man thrust forward, but from under his dark lashes he eyed Pigmy fiercely.

The pair were walking back toward the cave on the hillside, the dwarf with shrewd, glittering eyes as he watched Carl.

"I've found 'em!" he said under his breath. "I know who made him leave You-Bet without consultin' Pigmy Pete. I know you pretty well, Cold-Deck Carl, an' if I don't put a bug in Ferd Sutter's ear, set Pigmy Pete down fer a darned fool."

It was not more than three minutes' walk to the foot of the hill, and at its first fringe of undergrowth Carl stopped.

Not noticing his halt, Pigmy Pete advanced another step.

Then he heard his name called.

Whirling at the voice, he found himself face to face with Cold-Deck Carl.

"I'm no fool, Pigmy Pete," hissed the gambler-sport, his eyes blazing behind the cocked revolver that almost touched Pete's face. "You will never see the man in the cave!"

The lips of the dwarf suddenly contracted, but his expression lost none of its determination.

"Ye'r' showin' jedgment, Carl," he said, a faint smile even visible at the corners of his mouth. "I've come a long ways ter die so so clus' to ther captain, hev'n't I?"

"A long distance, Pigmy. Can't I tell him what you war goin' ter say?"

"Yes."

"Then out with it, fer by Heaven! I'm goin' ter press this trigger in less than two minutes."

Pigmy Pete seemed to think a moment.

"Dare you convey to him my last message?" he suddenly exclaimed. "Cold-Deck Carl, you're afraid ter swear thet you will tell Ferd Sutter what I am goin' ter say."

"I swear fer no man!" was the answer. "Go on, er keep yer mouth shut ferever!"

"Tell him, then, that he is playin' with ther meanest snake thet ever crawled," cried the dwarf, who might well be defiant to the last, for there was no mercy in the eyes that scintillated behind the revolver. "Tell him thet Cold-Deck Carl is playin' a game thet will ferever deprive him ov Zoe. Whisper in his ear, if you dare, that you are a traitor, a wolf thet trails with 'im ter eat the fawn when she's caught. Ah! you dare not tell him this."

At the end of Pigmy Pete's speech there was a bitter laugh which the gambler-sport did not relish.

"Nothin' else?" he said sarcastically.

"Yes; tell Zoe when you find her that to hate you with all her heart is her only salvation. But she'll do thet without tellin'."

This time the sport laughed.

"I'll tell 'em every word, Pigmy!" he said derisively. "Thar's nothin' mean about Cold-Deck Carl. Now I clear my way ter Zoe!"

"Clear it; but thar's Lola yet," said the dwarf.

"Lola! Thar's nothin' snappy about her but her eyes."

"Wait an' see! Yes, Cold-Deck Carl, wait an' see what thet daisy jumper ov mine kin do. Touch the trigger at yer finger, an' find out what thet black-eyed she wild-cat kin do."

"I'll do it!"

With the last word there rung out a loud report, and the little desperado who confronted the gambler-sport leaped into the air, to fall back and lie on the ground without a quiver.

"He died as ther fool dies!" ejaculated Cold-Deck Carl, as he stepped over the body, upon which he bestowed a merciless glance. "I'll serve the Mexican pantheress the same way if she crosses my path! Pigmy Pete, ef ye warn't dead, I'd like ter tell ye thet I'm goin' ter show Ferd Sutter that I'm a traitor ov the first class. But he'll find thet out when the time comes."

Away went Cold-Deck Carl with a cold, heartless laugh rippling upon his lips.

Ten minutes later he entered the cave in the hillside, and called the name of his companion, in dense darkness.

"Here I am," said a voice, and the gambler-sport felt a hand at his wrist. "I've been dreamin' of Zoe again. Cold-Deck, tell me, for Heaven's sake—and tell me now when I will see my child!"

"It'll be afore long, Ferd," was the answer.

"Did you hear a shot awhile ago?"

"I do not know; but something broke my rest."

"Wal, it war me. I went down the mountain an' found a snake in my path. Ov course, I killed it."

The "snake" was Pigmy Pete.

CHAPTER XVIII.

HOW THE ROUGHS PLAYED HOLD-UP.

"HYAR she comes! It's our first game ov hold-up, an' we must play it well."

"That whistle war at Bowie Gulch—seven miles up ther road."

"Yes; but how long will it take ther train ter come hyar?"

"Seven minutes."

Behind the few shanties that formed the little station of Bulldog, hardly ten miles east of You-Bet, sat six men on horses.

It was ten o'clock at night, and the moon, which now and then peeped over the edges of the fleecy clouds, saw their well-knit figures and the masks that covered their faces.

The train for which they waited would not stop at Bulldog unless a passenger desired to alight at that cheerless station, whose cabins had been cleaned out by the fate of the denizens of You-Bet.

But the masked men knew that the train would stop there.

They were certain that at Bowie Gulch—the last stopping-place—a man had boarded the train—a dark-faced, big-boned fellow, who had paid his fare like a gentleman to Bulldog.

They did not know, however, that the train had taken on two passengers, instead of one, at Bowie Gulch.

No; they did not see the second passenger—a veritable giant, with broad shoulders, soft, velvet-like hands and a pair of sparkling eyes.

The giant paid his fare to You-Bet, an incident that called a questioning look into the conductor's eyes.

"That's Hercules Goldspur!" ejaculated the man going to Bulldog, as he eyed the giant from the moment he boarded the train. "He'll give ther boys trouble thar ef he ain't covered in time. He's a dandy, with his velvet hand; but I'll get ther drop on him, an' help my pards win ther game!"

And from under his broad-rimmed hat he continued to eye The Man of the Velvet Hand, who was going back to Indian-raided You-Bet for a purpose.

As the train got under good speed after leaving Bulldog, the giant settled back in his seat as if totally unaware of the pair of eyes that watched him closely.

His observer was but four seats behind him, but on the opposite side, and in a position from which he could cover him in the twinkling of an eye.

Minutes seemed hours to the man bound for Bulldog.

He grew restless, and never took his eyes from Hercules Goldspur.

Suddenly the shrill whistle of the locomotive sounded through the passes, and the speed of the train began to decrease.

It was Bulldog!

There was a revolver in the hand of Goldspur's watcher, and his eyes were blazing with excitement.

In a voice whose accents seemed to fill every part of the coach, the conductor announced the name of the station, but the man kept his seat.

The moon, round and full, hung over the station, without a cloud to obstruct her light.

Before the few little tenantless shanties, the train came to a full stop, and then—

Six men on horseback dashed from behind the huts, and drawing rein before the engine covered the engineer with their revolvers.

It was the work of a moment.

"Hands up!" suddenly yelled a voice at the door of each coach, and the passengers saw a masked face and caught the gleam of a pistol-barrel.

"Ladies an' gentlemen, we want watches and money, not life; but we're prepared ter take that ef we're resisted. Shell out an' hold up."

Men brave under all circumstances, shrunk into the corners of their seats, and the few ladies in the coaches turned pale and gasped for breath.

A faint smile played with the corners of Hercules Goldspur's mouth.

Did he know that the man four seats behind him had partly risen, and had him covered with one of the deadliest revolvers in the mountains?

"Show up without squealin', pards!" shouted the burly fellow, who entered the coach occupied by The Man of the Velvet Hand.

He came down the aisle with a revolver cocked in his right hand, and with his left outstretched for spoil.

The surprise seemed to have paralyzed every passenger.

Men sullenly drew forth their watches and wallets and waited for the masked collector with a certain eagerness, as if to surrender their valuables was to get rid of him the sooner.

Hercules Goldspur was seen to pull his laced sombrero over his eyes as the command "Hands up!" rung through the car.

"The pard 'll know ye, Hercules!" ejaculated the watch-dog behind him. "Thet laced bat 'll give ye dead away. Whar's yer watch, my silken fingered gent?"

The collector advanced swiftly down the aisle.

Here he snatched a wallet from an extended hand, and there relieved a passenger of a gold watch.

It was the first train-robbery on the Northern

Pacific and moreover would probably be one that would long be remembered.

At length, several minutes after entering the coach, the masked desperado reached Hercules Goldspur.

"Yer filthy lucre, pard," he said. "Quick!" and the revolver lowered instantly looked into the giant's face.

The answer came like the bursting of a thunderbolt.

Like a flash Hercules Goldspur sprung at the piece of bronze throat visible under the dark mask, and the hand that knocked the revolver aside clutched the train-robber's trachea.

The man behind him leaped forward, but the giant threw his pard against him with a force that sent him back into his seat and against the window, smashing the glass into a thousand pieces.

"Shell out er drop is it, eh?" laughed the giant, as his hand tightening at the throat he touched shook the revolver from the robber's hand. "Ye've waked up ther wrong passenger, my daisy jumper. Gentlemen, come an' claim yer stakes."

He held the robber at arm's length while he addressed the speechless passengers.

"Don't want 'em, eh? Then, by George, he'll take 'em with 'im!"

He began to drag his helpless captive toward the door.

Suddenly the passengers came forward.

"Clean 'im out an' be durned quick about it!" cried the giant.

In an instant it was done, and then leaning over the seat in which the passenger bound for Bulldog was lying, insensible and bleeding from a terrible wound made by the smashed glass, his left hand closed on his throat.

"Two at a time!" he laughed, as he dragged him from the seat and broke for the door with the twain. "My name is Goldspur, an' nobody knows it better than these daisy pards."

He appeared on the platform in the moonlight still clutching his victims' throats.

Behind him were the uncouth shanties of Bulldog, before a steep bank which terminated in the waters of a little creek almost a hundred feet below.

"Down ye go, pards!" he said, and the next minute two human forms went rolling down the bank one after the other in a terrible race to the bottom.

Hercules Goldspur watched them for a moment, and then turned toward the coach behind the one he occupied.

As he opened the door he drew a silver-mounted revolver.

"Halt, thar!" rung out a voice as his right foot crossed the threshold of the car. "Hold up yer hands—!"

The interruption was a derisive laugh, and Hercules Goldspur fired straight at the man in aisle.

There was a cry and a tumble, and the car robber lay dead with his pockets full of spoil!

"Hev they tackled the sleepers?" asked Hercules.

"No," answered a dozen passengers.

The giant withdrew and swung himself to the last step below the platform.

His quick eye caught sight of two horsemen facing the engine, and as he looked he saw two men leap from the steps of the Express car.

The next moment the revolver of the velvet-handed man spoke the doom of one horseman, who threw up both hands and pitched backward, and a second shot sent another robber staggering to the very wheels of the engine!

Without stopping to return the fire, the remaining mounted villain turned but the moonlight enabled Hercules to stop with another shot the man on foot.

Twice he spun around as the bullet hit home, and then fell forward on his face.

By this time the bell-rope above the giant's head was being jerked violently, but the engineer needed no command to move on.

"Their game didn't win," smiled Hercules Goldspur, as he walked down the aisle of the car he boarded at Bowie Gulch and dropped quietly back into his old seat. "Now, if I kin find Zoe at You-Bet ez easy ez I cleaned thet party out, I'll be satisfied. I wonder when they'll stop another train."

He was not permitted to remain unmolested long.

A crowd of thankful and excited passengers surrounded him, and would have made him the lion of the hour if the engineer, making up for lost time, had not sounded the signal for You-Bet.

Hercules rose and pushed his way through the crowd.

"Good night, gentlemen," he said to all. "I don't carry any cards an' can't exchange. My name's Goldspur, however, an' ef I do say it myself, I'm a somebody when it comes ter a tussle."

Then he doffed his laced hat ere he passed from the car and waved his hand at the engineer as he struck the ground and stood stalwart and handsome in the moonlight before the frame station of You-Bet.

"Three cheers for Goldspur!" cried an enthusiastic passenger from the platform.

There was a good response which elicited a smile from the man for whom they were intended.

"Cheers ar' cheap," he ejaculated. "I'd rather find Zoe than hev a thousand. Now, my Mexican wild-cat, Lola, ef you've fetched Zoe ter You-Bet we'll meet ag'in."

He started off among the silent and lightless cabins as the train moved on again, and soon disappeared from the sight of the people whose valuables if not lives he had saved.

"I'll look in at Joe's first," he said. "I'll find information thar if Lola's come back."

Three minutes afterward he paused suddenly in front of the well known gambling den of You-Bet, and stared at it standing blackened and desolate between him and the moon.

The door was wide open, but not a sound came from within.

"What's up?" he exclaimed moving forward. "Hev ther pards ov You-Bet pulled up stakes an' lit out?"

He was at the threshold with his last words and just then a gust of wind blew something against his face.

Seeing that it was a piece of paper fastened to the door, he struck a match and held it up.

There was some writing on the paper and with some little difficulty Hercules Goldspur read:

"The Indians came to You-Bet and did pretty much as they pleased. There's nothing left to tell."

That was all.

"That's a fact, rothin' left ter tell," commented Goldspur, and as if attracted by an object on the floor, he stooped with the burning match.

"Ther Injuns did come. Thar's blood on ther floor," he said. "Ef Lola did bring Zoe back ter You-Bet she didn't stay long. Hercules Goldspur, you ar' a little too subsequent. The Mexican wild-cat still holds the best hand."

Casting away the match, The Man of the Velvet Hand went out from the deserted gambling den and halted in the middle of You-Bet's main thoroughfare.

"I'll find her yet!" he grated.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE VELVET HANDS AGAIN.

It was natural that Hercules Goldspur should think that Lola had taken Zoe to You-Bet.

He did not know that the Mexican huntress had been surprised and robbed in turn by the Happy Rattler, an event which the reader has witnessed.

Losing Lola's trail in the mountains he had boarded the train at Bowie Gulch and come to You-Bet where he expected to find Lola and Zoe, now in the arms of her father, Ferdinand Sutter.

But he was doomed to disappointment.

You Bet was, to all appearances, deserted, and he had cleaned out a portion of its late citizens on the train to find himself the only occupant of the well-known place.

As he gave utterance to the words "I'll find her yet," he clinched his hands and left the deserted gambling den with its tell-tale paper and blood-stains, and walked down the street.

For a lurking red-skin or white enemy in ambush he presented a splendid target.

The wind raised the brim of his laced sombrero and opened his embroidered jacket.

"Blamed ef them red-skins didn't clean the hull town out," he continued. "I'm monarch ov all I survey, ain't I? Ef I hadn't a job on my hands I'd settle down hyar an' proclaim myself king ov You Bet. King Hercules wouldn't sound bad after all. But I'd never consent to be king until I could make Zoe queen. Oh, you Mexican witch! I'll show you one ov these days thet yer throat, yallar as gold, will jes' fit my hand. King ov You Bet!" And at the thought the Idaho giant laughed till he awoke every echo of the Indian-plundered town.

All at once he stopped, and turning on his heel walked toward the suburbs where the shafts were.

"I wonder ef they left the mines untouched? Thar's a bonanza hyar fer some enterprisin' individual. Don't I mind ov hearin' in Deadwood not six months ago, that thar war a gold lined shaft in You-Bet? Mebbe it war a miner's lie; but I'll find out. Lola ain't hyar with Zoe an' I've got some time on my hands."

He reached the yawning openings in the earth unmolested, and selecting one from among them all, fearlessly swung himself over the abyss and began to descend the ladder which stopped only where another began.

Suddenly when in the midst of cimmerian darkness, he paused and looked up.

He saw the stars far overhead, but could see nothing else.

"God!" fell from his tongue as something shot past him with the velocity of a bullet. "There's somebody up yonder."

In another instant another unseen missile went past him, so near this time that it touched the rim of his hat.

A mad oath shot from between Goldspur's clenched teeth.

"Foller'd! by heavens!" he grated. "I'm not ther only livin' soul in You-Bet ef the In-

ins did leave it deserted when they left! Somebody who don't like Hercules Goldspur is up there."

With eyes that emitted sparks of rage he paused no longer on the ladder, but went upward.

Another missile grazed his shoulder and went to join the others that had preceded it to the bottom of the shaft.

He could not tell how large the objects were, but from the way they whined him he had a right to judge that they were boulders larger than his head.

Two hundred feet above him was the brink of the yawning chasm, and the ropes that held in its place the ladder that supported his weight, were liable to be cut at any moment by the foe at the top.

Still, despite the terrible danger that menaced him, The Man of the Velvet Hand kept his way upward.

His grip on the ladder against the wall was firm, for he knew that one of the heavy stones coming down at intervals was likely to strike him and stun, if not hurl him from his insecure stair.

"You dar'n't wait fer me!" he exclaimed, with upturned face. "A man what would hurl boulders at a fellow in my fix is meaner than a Mexican thief. You are mean, dirty coward, who dar'n't face Hercules Goldspur, an' give 'im a show!"

The response to these words was a rock which struck the giant on the shoulder, and breaking one of his hands loose, caused him to swing out into the darkness!

But he clutched the tighter with his other hand, and re-secured the hold which had been broken loose.

Up, up he went, now with a naked bowie-knife between his teeth, and more than eager to meet the enemy, surely at the top of the shaft.

All at once the ladder oscillated in a manner that would have sent a chill to the heart of many a brave man placed in the giant's situation.

"From stone to knife!" he hissed madly, and sounding his desperate case to the depths, he went up the ladder like a sailor, hand over hand. "You've ter cut ther ladder loose durned soon, my daisy, er Hercules will be on deck."

He saw the brink of the chasm while he spoke.

The ladder oscillated more than ever. One side was already cut loose.

At times it swung out into the darkness beneath his own weight, and then came back against the wall of the shaft with a force that almost stunned him.

But Hercules Goldspur now saw more than a sky studded with stars.

He saw a figure that leaned over the top of the shaft, and he caught the gleam of a knife-blade.

The sight nerved him to renewed exertion.

Oh, for a grip on the firm ground above.

He would give worlds for a chance at the human throat above him.

Suddenly a wild exclamation of triumph grated on his ears.

It told him that the knife was finishing its work.

The next instant the ladder seemed to give way beneath him, and he made one wild leap at the top of the shaft with his velvet hand.

All his agility and strength was in that leap for life.

As his hands caught the fringe of the shaft, the ladder, cut loose a second too late, went rattling down the mine, and Hercules Goldspur was left clinging to a frail hold, from which the bowie that had deprived him of his support might cut him free!

"By the eternal gods! I am hyar!" shot from his throat, as by a mighty display of strength, he drew himself up and appeared so suddenly on the firm earth that the enemy at the shaft sprung back with an exclamation of terror.

Hercules Goldspur did not wait to catch his well-spent breath, but cleared the space between him and his enemy with a bound, and swooped down upon the would-be killer like an eagle.

"Cut'in' a ladder from under him doesn't wipe out Goldspur!" he cried, and before the listener could draw a weapon of any kind, The Man of the Velvet Hand had jerked him from the ground and was holding him at arm's length as a man sometimes holds a child, only one of the terrible velvet hands was at the prisoner's throat.

"Not ther person I thought you war, but you'll do!" said Goldspur, with a malicious laugh that seemed to increase the devilish light that blazed in his eyes. "I came hyar ter find you, hang me if I didn't! But you found me, eh? Wal, it's all one, I guess. How'd you like ter go on ther hunt ov ther ladder?" And as the giant laughed, he wheeled and held his prisoner over the yawning mouth of the shaft.

Not the person he expected to see?

Who, then, was the giant's prisoner?

The dark eyes that stared at mounted fire at Hercules would have told the reader could he have seen them.

Goldspur knew them well for they belonged to no other person than Lola, the Poker Queen.

"You first stole Zoe an' next you foller me," continued Hercules after holding his captive for a moment over the abyss. "Don't you see ther yer throat jes' fits my hand. Ho! ho! my poker princess; you're a daisy jumper; but ther heel of Goldspur will crush any flower. Whar's Zoe?"

How defiantly the eyes first made reply; but when he removed his hand from Lola's throat and placed her on her feet again, but still in his power, the mad light waned.

"No lies! I want the solid truth er you git this, Lola!" and the giant's right hand was thrust almost into the girl's throat. "You stole the girl—you took Zoe from the mountain cabin. Whar is she?"

Then it was that Lola's black eyes seemed to twinkle.

"Yes, I robbed you of Zoe," she said; "but if you want her you must seek her of the man who robbed me."

"Who was that—Cold-Deck Carl?"

"No; the Man from Silver Bow."

"The Happy Rattler!" exclaimed Goldspur.

"An' he robbed you of Zoe? It makes a new trail for me, Lola, did you know it was Goldspur down the shaft when you begun to send ther stones down?"

The Mexican's eyes said yes.

"An' you cut ther ladder loose ter fix Goldspur forever?" he went on. "Lola, you knew that I would never spare the person who robbed me of Zoe. I hev sworn that I'd bring you ter settlement some day fer ther theft. I am hyer. I hev you in ther clutches ov Hercules Goldspur. My Mexican wild-cat ef I spare you I make myself out a liar."

Before the girl could lift a hand he leaped madly at her, and again she was lifted from the ground.

"Ye ar' goin' down arter ther ladder!" he fairly hissed. "I'll find Zoe without you, my Mexican rattlesnake. I'll run ther Happy Rattler down an' make 'im give up his prize."

He turned again toward the shaft, a black hole in the earth at his feet.

He held the girl above his head firmly clutched by both hands. "I'll clean 'em out ez I go along!" he grated.

"We'll see about that, Hercules Goldspur!"

As these words rung out a horse covered with foam halted a few feet away and a revolver changed the scene.

Changed the scene, we say, for Lola dropped from Goldspur's hands, and the giant reeled to the edge of the ravine below which he disappeared as the shooter leaped to the ground and darted forward.

CHAPTER XX.

A LIFE FOR A SOMBRERO.

"WELL, you got him!" exclaimed Lola wheeling upon the man who halted before her revolver in hand.

"I should grin," was the answer, and the speaker shot a quick glance toward the shaft. "He hed them soft hands ov his on yer, eh! He war goin' ter throw ye down ther shaft ov ther Black Bonanza. Don't yer feel kinder grateful to Con Griggs ov You-Bet?"

"I am grateful," said Lola, as she looked into the face of the man whose shot in all probability put an end to Hercules Goldspur's career. "Would you have dropped him if he had not been holding me over the mine?"

"That didn't hasten my shot. What do yer think he did to-night?"

"I cannot guess."

"I should reckon not. Wal, a lot ov us tried ter play a certain game called hold-up in these parts an' war gittin' along boss when he picked up ther blindest hand I ever saw a human git an' played it through in spite ov us all. To-night that happened, Lola—not more'n an hour ago. I am ther only man what got away. Some he choked, some he shot."

"Whar did it happen?"

"At Bulldog up the road. It war a time I tell yer, gal. I couldn't beat ther trainter You-Bet, but I didn't lose any time comin' hyer all the same. Wal, I got hyer in time ter git a hand that trumped Goldspur's last aces. I didn't give 'im time ter know that it war Con Griggs, er Crimson Con that dropped him. Will he ever interrupt another game ov hold-up! Wal, my daisy, I ruther guess not."

The man laughed at his success.

He was a person whom Lola had seen before in You-Bet when it was populated by the roughs and toughs who inhabited it at the commencement of our romance.

Broad shouldered and handsome, with dark eyes and a raven mustache that streamed beyond either cheek in the wind, was Crimson Con, the avenger of the men killed by Hercules Goldspur on the night train between Bowie Gulch and You-Bet.

He left Lola and walked to the edge of the shaft when he had finished his laugh of triumph and revenge.

The Mexican beauty saw him lean over the dark pit and listen with a half-bent hand behind his ear.

"It's ez silent ez ther grave down ther," he said. "Thar's water three feet deep at ther

bottom ov ther shaft. Ef I only hed thet man's laced hat ter exhibit. I'd be satisfied."

Lola gave him a strange look which was a mute interrogation.

"Thar's not another hat like it in Idaho," he went on. "Hercules hed it made ter order, an' allus boasted thet he'd kill the man what wore one like it. Lola, I want that hat!"

"Better not," said the girl, as her eyes brightened. "There may be a live man at the bottom of that shaft."

"If thar is I'll turn parson, hang me ef I don't," laughed Con. "A man with a bullet in his head alive arter a tumble ov two hundred feet? What ar' ye tryin' ter give this sage-chick, Lola?"

The girl did not reply for a moment, but her eyes burned half-resentingly.

"If you think so," she exclaimed, "go and find that laced hat."

"By Jehosaphat! ef I don't, I'm a saint!"

He started off and Lola's eyes followed him until the shanties of You-Bet and the shadows that prevailed hid him from view.

"I'll wait and see what he will do," she murmured, and did not move until Crimson Con came back dragging after him an immense coil of rope capable of supporting a great weight.

"It's the laced hat I'm after, Lola," he laughed. "Thar's not another like it in Idaho. Think ov that!"

Going to the edge of the pit, he began to lower the rope, and the girl who stepped to his side watched it descend with a good deal of curiosity.

"Now fer ther hat!" exclaimed Crimson Con, as he made fast one end of the rope to a rock near at hand. "Don't think I kin climb ther cord? Nothin's easier, Lola. Ther side ov ther shaft will act ez a brace fer one's feet, an' he'll come up slick an' sure."

Ere he lowered himself over the edge of the mine he drew a ten-inch bowie and placed it between his teeth so as to have it ready for an emergency at a moment's notice, then with a look and a smile at the Mexican he clambered down into the shaft with his bronze hands at the rope.

"If by chance Hercules Goldspur should be alive you'll make the acquaintance of a pair of death hands, Crimson Con," said Lola, in an undertone as the last vestige of the hat-bunter disappeared amid the gloom of the shaft.

The vibrations of the rope told the girl that Con was still going down deeper and deeper into the dark depths of the old shaft.

He expected to find the laced sombrero of his victim floating in the water at the bottom of the pit, and trusted to his hands to secure the coveted prize.

Lola watched the oscillating rope until she was satisfied that Crimson Con had reached his journey's end, for the motion suddenly ceased, but not a sound, not even an exclamation of success, flared up to her.

She waited five, ten, fifteen minutes; but the rope did not move again.

"Come up at your leisure, Con!" she laughed, turning away. "I cannot wait all night for you. When I see you with the laced sombrero on your head I'll believe that the man who clutched my throat awhile ago will never run off with another girl."

Lola walked from the spot, and stopped not until she, like Hercules Goldspur had lately done, had inspected the interior of Joe's gambling-den, with its tell-tale paper and blood-stains on the floor.

"The Happy Rattler did not bring Zoe back to You-Bet," she said. "I have missed the trail. I wonder where Cold Deck Carl and Ferd Sutter are, and what they have discovered. Ah! if Pigmy Pete were here. I told him when I left him that I would hunt Hercules Goldspur down and I have done so. I robbed him of Zoe, but in turn I have been robbed, and by that dead-beat who calls himself the Happy Rattler from Silver Bow. Let me find him again! I will make sure that he never robs another woman."

Lola made a tour of the town, but nobody greeted her.

The one swoop of the avenging red-skins of the Northwest had been sufficient.

You-Bet had had raids before, but none that approached the last in completeness.

She saw signs of desolation even in the weird moonlight that lay on the ground.

Cabin doors stood wide open, but their last occupants were gone.

She went to the frame station, but it, too, was deserted.

As if hating everything civilized, the red-skins had gutted it.

The telegraph poles bore scars made by their knives and hatchets, but they had spared the wires.

"I'm queen here," laughed Lola. "I couldn't get up a game of draw were I to hammer on every door in You-Bet. When I left here, everything was lively. The Indians did it all. They came and killed, and then left You-Bet desolated. I wonder if they struck Pigmy? Why didn't I ask Crimson Con?"

She turned and ran toward the Black Bonanza shaft.

More than an hour had elapsed since she saw the rough descend into its gloomy depths.

If he had found the laced hat of The Man of the Velvet Hand he should be above ground again, victorious.

She was eager to ask Crimson Con what had become of her pard, the dwarf named Pigmy Pete, and her step, soon brought her to the shaft.

The first thing that greeted her eyes was the rope stretched taut from the stone to the edge of the shaft.

Suddenly it swayed a little, and then moved back and forth, as if somebody was trying to make his way to the top by its aid.

"Con's coming up at last!" cried Lola. "If he wears the big hat he'll be the proudest man in Idaho."

Her eagerness to greet the man coming up the rope took her to the very edge of the opening in the earth.

"Con! Con!" she exclaimed. "Thank Heaven! you have the hat with the shining lace!"

There was a reply the girl did not understand.

It was midway between an oath and a groan, but whatever it was it seemed to hold her to the spot.

All at once the head of the giant's enemy appeared at the top of the shaft.

Lola started up with an exclamation of joy. "The hat!" she cried. "Crimson Con, Lola can love you if you have it!"

The next instant a different cry parted the lips of Pigmy Pete's black-eyed pard.

The man she had greeted threw himself from the mine by a desperate effort.

She uttered a shriek of horror.

It was Crimson Con, but such a sight!

His clothes hung in shreds about his person, and water dripped from every one.

His eyes had the glare of a maniac's, and, most terrible of all, there was a rent in his throat as if made by the teeth of a half-starved panther!

Lola recoiled from this awful apparition that had come up from the bowels of the earth.

"My God! You cannot be Crimson Con!" welled from her throat.

"I am Con! There is a dyin' devil down yonder. For God's sake, Lola, cut the rope!"

With a cry the girl sprang forward, and three rapid strokes with a glittering knife severed the cord which disappeared down the shaft.

At that moment Crimson Con fell back with a terrible yell of agony.

Lola lost no time in reaching his side.

"I found the owner of the laced hat," grated the sombrero-hunter. "Lola, I've fought grizzlies, an' tackled Injuns an' panthers in my time; but to-night I struck the worst pill in the box."

"Hercules Goldspur?"

"Hercules the Devil! Look hyar, Lola."

The man turned toward the Poker Queen and with his own hands opened the ghastly wound in his throat.

"With his hands he did it, Lola," he said.

"If I had them velvet fingers I'd never ask for a bowie. The hat? It's cost Crimson Con his life. To perdition with that laced sombrero!"

The eyes of the throat-torn rough stared wildly at the girl who knelt in the moonlight beside him, and then clinching his hands on the ground, he grated his teeth and fell back dead!

It was a life for a hat.

CHAPTER XXI.

THREE TRIGGERS.

THROUGH the first flash of a brilliant dawn a man astride of a quaint-looking donkey was making his way along a narrow mountain trail.

There was a smile of self-satisfaction visible on his bronzed face, and unable to contain the exuberant spirits that made it, he at times chuckled audibly.

"Got it? Of course I've got it!" he would exclaim. "George you an' me ar' about ter strike the boss bonanza ov our lives. Git along—a little faster, old pard. I promised ter reach the mountain camp ter hold my confab with him about daylight."

The donkey slowly pricked up his long ears and gradually increased his gait.

At last, after emerging from a thicket of young trees, which grew so closely together, that the donkey had with difficulty forced his way through, the man came suddenly upon a little mountain camp and opened his eyes at sight of a man who leaned against a tree with arms folded, and apparently waiting for some one.

"It's him!" he exclaimed. "Ef he's alone, we'll soon settle our little biz'ness."

All at once the man at the tree looked up and caught sight of the morning caller.

A strange gleam lighted up his eyes, and he could hardly control his agitation.

"Wal, I'm yer kernal on time," said the man on the donkey. "What's yer pard?"

"Gone away," was the quick reply. "I told

you that I would arrange to be alone when you came. I am the sole occupant of the camp."

The rider dismounted and leaned against the side of his donkey, who lowered his head meekly, and looked quite unlike the Kicking George whose exploits the reader has already witnessed.

"Wal, colonel, I'm hyer accordin' ter agreement," he said. "I introduced myself t'other day when I run ag'in' ye, ez ther Happy Rattler from Silver Bow. I'm the same individual yet. What's the reward now?"

Before speaking, the tenant of the camp left his tree and advanced toward the Rattler, whom he eyed intently.

"In the first place, do you know where my child is?"

"Wal, I calkerlate," was the answer, accompanied by a grin. "Ef I didn't know anything about her, d'ye think I come hyer?"

"I would think not."

"Right you ar', colonel; right! Name the reward."

"I have done so. It is ten thousand dollars."

With a laugh indicative of disgust, the Happy Rattler turned to his donkey, and prepared to mount.

"We'll proceed ter a more sulubrious climate, my beau ideal," he said, addressing the beast. "We ar' not appreciated hyer, my smilin' cherub. Good mornin', colonel."

"Hold!" and Ferdinand Sutter, the father of Zoe, sprang forward and laid his hand on the shoulder of the Happy Rattler, at the touch of which the mountain dead-beat turned. "You may have terminated this interview, but I have not. Ten thousand does not seem to strike you. How much will?"

"What's ten thousand fer a man what they say hez ther biggest ranch in Arizona?" he said. "Ain't thet daisy gal ov yours worth more'n thet?"

"The reward is not the price I set upon her, sir," was the quick retort as Sutter colored.

"What's your price?"

"Now ye'r comin' at it. What's my figgers? Wal, they're a notch higher than yer ten thousand. Two hundred thousand dollars."

The rancher seemed to recoil a step as if the sum coupled to the unblushing effrontery of the man, amazed him.

"It doesn't seem ter strike yer. I thought mebbe it wouldn't," grinned the Happy Rattler. "Two hundred thousand fer a gal you say is priceless. I'm old bizness. Ef you won't pay, you can't take the goods."

The lips of the man from Silver Bow closed firmly behind the last word.

His air was insulting, his face enough to madden the man with whom he was trifling.

"Do you really know where Zoe is?" asked Sutter.

"Would I come hyer ef I didn't?"

"My God! nol!"

"Let me say thet yer word fer them two hundred thousand is ez good ez gold. Give it an' yer long hunt fer yer gal shall end."

Sutter stood silent before the dead-beat.

What! bargain with such a lying viper for his own child?

The thought chased the hot blood to the father's brain.

He took one hasty stride which carried him to within three feet of the Happy Rattler, and the next instant his revolver looked into the villain's face.

"I mean business also!" he said madly. "I shall deal no further with you. Now, sir, where is my child? Tell me the truth and prove it truth by conducting me to Zoe, or by the eternal heavens! I'll leave you here, food for the buzzards!"

Not a muscle of the dead-beat's face moved under this threat.

He leaned composedly against the fore-shoulders of his donkey and looked calmly into the weapon that cowered him.

"See hyer, colonel, thet's liable ter go off!" he said.

"Indeed it is, and go off it shall if you don't come to terms. Decide instantly—I am in no mood for fooling. Years of bitter disappointment have not softened my nature. Will you show me my child?"

"Fer how much?"

"The old reward."

"I guess I'll hev to," drawled the Happy Rattler. "I'll put thet two hundred thousand down in the loss column. We don't allers hold the best hand, an' on more'n one occasion I've seen a revolver rake in ther pot. Ten thousand, eh? It's a bargain, colonel, ef it does cut me down one hundred an' ninety thousand. Kin ye go now?"

"Yes."

"What's yer boss?"

"Will you wait for me here?"

"Yes."

Lowering his revolver, Ferdinand Sutter turned away, and soon disappeared, although the Happy Rattler's look believed him as long as any part of him could be kept in sight.

"George, he called us, an' made us show up," he said, glancing at his donkey. "Ferd's snip in ther old feller yet. Mebbe we'll yet go back

ter Silver Bow with ther bonanza we've set our hearts on, an' mebbe we won't."

By this time Sutter was seen returning, mounted on a horse and equipped for the journey upon which he thought he had forced the man from Silver Bow.

The Happy Rattler eyed him sharply from under his long lashes as he came up, and gave the donkey a dig in the ribs which started him forward.

"It is to Zoe at last, thank God!" ejaculated the Arizonian. "I will surprise Carl when we meet again. Zoe—Zoe! I long to take you in the arms that have not held you since you were a babe!"

The two men rode side by side as long as the trail could admit of their doing so; but when its narrowness prevented, the Rattler went ahead.

"When will we reach Zoe?" eagerly questioned Sutter.

"Afore long, colonel. She's a daisy girl. I tell you—worth a bigger pile than I'm gettin' fer my information. I'll hev ter go back to Silver Bow without enough fer one decent stake at draw-poker."

The Happy Rattler turned to Sutter as he spoke a countenance lugubrious enough to open the heart of any man; but it did not move the Arizonian's.

All at once the dead-beat drew rein and reeled in his saddle.

At the same time he clapped a dusky hand upon his breast, and gasped:

"My—old—trouble! This infernal—heart o' mine! Colonel, for Heaven's sake—"

Without finishing the sentence, he fell forward on his donkey's neck.

Instantly the rancher urged his horse forward and drew up beside the Rattler.

He put forth his hand and tried to lift the man's head.

His heart seemed to stand still, his brain whirled.

If the Happy Rattler should die there in the mountain trail, when would he find Zoe?

"You shall not die here!" he exclaimed.

"I calkerlate not to!" rung out suddenly, as the bent figure of the villain from Silver Bow sprang erect. "It's my call this time! Throw down your hand!"

The change so sudden and unexpected startled every fiber of Sutter's frame.

He recoiled, and his hand shot toward his revolver; but the Rattler's words arrested it.

"Throw down yer hand!" was uttered as Sutter found himself looking into the muzzle of a forty-eight-caliber "bulldog" behind which glared the mad, tigerish eyes of the Happy Rattler.

The tables had been completely turned; the sudden attack of heart disease was all a sham.

"Two hundred thousand, my plump sage-chick, or I'll keep all I know!" laughed theascal. "I'm a daisy when I want ter raise ther wind. I laugh when I shoot. It's my nature, an' George grins while he kicks. Open yer head, colonel, an' say what it shall be—two hundred thousand or scattered brains!"

The rancher's eyes flashed before the leveled weapon.

"Treat with you for the sum you name? Never!" he cried. "Shoot! dead beat of Silver Bow. Now I will not give you a dollar for the secret you want to sell. Zoe shall die before her father treats with a liar."

"Then, my stubborn hollyhock, I'll scoop in both gal an' ranch. I'll make myself Colonel Rattler ov Arizona, an' ther two pards ov Silver Bow will end their days in clover!"

A coarse laugh followed the last word, but ere the Happy Rattler could give the trigger of his revolver the required pressure a voice startled both men:

"Drop that pistol or I'll drop you Rattler!"

There was more than a threat in the startling tones.

Removing his eyes from Colonel Sutter the dead-beat looked toward the speaker, and standing on a rock further down the trail he saw the handsome form of Cold-Deck Carl with a rifle pressed against his shoulder.

"Down with yer weapon, Rattler! I'd sooner kill you than a wolf."

The Happy Rattler looked a moment and then lowered his revolver with a wolfish growl.

"Take ther trick, Cold-Deck," he snapped.

"But I've got ther secret safe."

CHAPTER XXII.

THE RATTLER'S "TALK."

"Wal, I calkerlate," remarked the man who sat on the back of a donkey and let the reins hang at one on the beast's neck. "Jes' when I held a hand that would make any man's eyes snap, Cold-Deck Carl said, 'Drop thet revolver!' an' I 'er an'. But mebbe he got no I say George dig in ther ribs, an' I've seen."

The Happy Rattler laughed heartily at the thought of the manner in which he had cut with the Arizonian at the future to export two hundred thousand dollars from him at the revolver's muzzle.

His plan had failed, and three hours after the episode he drew rein far from the scene of his

mishap, and could afford to laugh at the men he had left behind.

Five minutes later he stood in the presence of Zoe, whose eyes were full of eagerness when she addressed him.

"Where is he?" she asked. "You have come back alone."

"It looks that way, Zoe. He wouldn't accept my terms, consequently George and I came back unescorted."

The humor of the mountain dead-beat was disgusting to the occupant of the cavern.

It made her eyes flash.

"Your terms?" she said, striding up to him as he folded his arms upon his chest and watched her with a sardonic grin. "If I had but known this! I have relied on your word. You promised to bring my father to me."

"Wal, he wouldn't come to terms."

"What were your terms? You made them after you left me."

"Of course I did."

"Name them, if you dare."

"Now, don't go off like powder, my little witch," he smiled. "I went to yer father on bizness, an' ov course I hed terms. They war reasonable, but he said no. I said, in my sweetest voice, 'Two hundred thousand ter Zoe,' but he said he'd sooner see you dead than treat with me."

Zoe appeared to recoil a step.

"Did my father say this?" she exclaimed.

"Nothin' more, nothin' less. Mebbe I struck 'im too high; but I arterwards got ther earl on him, an' hed it when Col. Deck Carl, his pard, got ther drop on my anatomy. Wal, I've got you left, Zoe, an' I'll fetch him to terms yet."

"Which means that for two hundred thousand you'll restore me to my father?"

"That's about ther size ov it."

"Not a dollar of it shall he pay!" exclaimed Zoe, her eyes filling with indignation. "I did not know that you wanted to sell me to my own father. 'You shall not do that.'"

"I'm ther seraph what makes ther terms," he grinned, leaning against the wall of the cavern, his somewhat dumpy figure revealed by the fire that burned on the earthen floor. "Look at me, Zoe. I'm not exactly one ov Raphael's cherubs, but ef you'd trace my ancestry back you might discover that ther blood ov one ov them pards flows through my veins. Oh, I'm ther daisy jumper ov Silver Bow, somewhat ov a character; an' I make terms with yer father, not you."

"Make them and rue them!" cried the girl, looking him in the face. "I have a friend."

"Hercules Goldspur, I guess."

Zoe's eyes brightened.

"Hercules Goldspur!" she exclaimed proudly.

"Ther man with ther silken hand!" sneered the Rattler!

"Yes."

"Thar's a throat I'll bet it'll never clutch," and elevating his chin he smoothed his throat with one of his bronze hands. "I've heard ov Hercules. Yer pard, I presume."

"The man I love."

"Thet giant? You're a pigmy beside him, Zoe."

"It makes no difference. I owe him something; why not give him my love?" she asked. "He took me from the man who abducted me from the old ranch when I was a babe. He stole me from that wretch at the risk of his life."

"But he didn't take you home an' say: 'Fred Sutter, hyer's yer child.'"

"No, he did not."

"He carried you from one place ter another an' landed at last at You-Bet. An' you love that choker? Wal, I would, too."

The Happy Rattler's voice was full of insult and derision.

"Don't you see?" he went on. "Hercules Goldspur bez got terms ter make with yer father. He'll hunt 'im up some day an' say, 'Give me ther ranch an' take Zoe.' We've all, ot our price, Zoe, an' the cherub thet addresses you is one ov ther high-priced ones."

"He has no price," exclaimed the girl. "Hercules Goldspur would not rob my father of a dollar."

"Then, why did he run you out ov You-Bet when he discovered that yer father hed come fer ye? It's too thin, girl."

Believing his question a poser, the speaker inserted his thumbs underneath his armpits and looked into Zoe's face with a grin.

"Time will tell," she said. "He will explain all some day."

"Whar do you think he is now? Huntin' Lola, an' not ther Happy Rattler. Wal, when he finds ther Poker Queen he'll git precious little information. I may ez well declar' myself hyer. Two hundred thousand, er Ferd Sutter never gits his child!"

"We shall see!"

"So we shall, my robin. When I struck yer trail I knew at once that I had found a new occupation. 'No more loffin' at Silver Bow till we've cleaned Sutter out,' I said ter Kickin' George, an' he winked an' said: 'Rattler, them's my sentiments, too.' I could take yer ter 'Frisco an' trade ye to a gold-bug ez my niece, though I'm not so strikinly handsome ez

you ar'; but I prefer to treat with Ferd Sutter, ther bonanza prince ov Arizony."

With a look of scorn, Zoe turned away and walked to a darkened part of the cavern.

"She's worth ther bull ranch—such a gal ez thet!" ejaculated the Happy Rattler, following her with his eyes. "I struck a bonanza when I made Lola give 'er up. Euchered by Cold Deck ter win by an' by. Rattler, you an' George will go back ter Silver Bow ther dandiest pards in ther Northwest."

Certain that Zoe was safe in the cavern in which she had kept herself concealed during his absence, on a promise that he would bring her father back with him, the dead-beat of Montana turned on his heel and left the cave.

He found his mule where he had left him, on the outside, with the lines lying on his neck, and looking as demure and inoffensive as usual.

Taking the bridle he led Kicking George away.

"Hark, pard!" he said, suddenly, halting some distance from the cavern.

It was evident that the donkey's ears had caught a suspicious sound, for he lifted them suddenly, and kept them elevated while the Rattler leaned forward and listened.

All at once the beast jerked back and wrenched the bridle from his master's hand.

"Thet means Injun!" fell from his lips. "The smell ov 'em nearly sets George crazy. Nothin' else effects 'im so."

He turned half-way round and looked down the trail, while his hand whipped out the revolver which he had lately presented at Sutter's head.

"Whar ar' they?" he cried. "I'm a bizness man from Silver Bow. I'm p'sen on foot when thar ar' Injuns about. Show up, my red buttercups, er fervever hold yer peace."

The last word had hardly left the Rattler's lips ere a stalwart figure sprang into the path about thirty feet in advance of him, and the red hand that went upward made a certain sign in mid-air.

Quick as a flash the Happy Rattler executed a retrograde movement which brought him to where his excited donkey stood, and as he threw his figure behind the beast, he let drive at the Indian in the path.

It was a shot of which Buffalo Bill would have been proud, for the red-skin leaped into the air and fell back, dead before he touched the ground.

"That's my sign, reddy! I didn't understand yours," exclaimed the Happy Rattler. "When I compromise with an Injun I'll become a saint. No sirree! Put me down as an Injun-bater. Silver Bow is anti-red-skin ter ther bone."

For a moment after the fall of the Indian there was no reply to the Rattler's defiance, but all at once the air resounded with yells, and several bullets whistled over his head.

"A leetle high!" he said to his donkey. "George, if it warn't so risky I'd draw 'em up an' let you kick 'em ter ther huntin'-grounds. Mebbe they want Zoe; but they can't have 'er while Ferd Sutter lives to pay ther two hundred thousand."

At this moment a dozen Indians appeared on the trail, and the Happy Rattler raised his head over the donkey's back and thrust two heavy revolvers forward.

"One ov Raphael's latter-day cherubs, at yer service!" he ejaculated. "Stand off, my beuu ideals, er I'll cultivate death among ye. I'm p'sen on foot. Keep off! Don't rile ther Rattler from Silver Bow."

It was far from the red-skins' intention to "keep off," for their eyes fairly blazed, and the yells that answered the Rattler foretold desperate work.

The trail swarmed with Indians.

The deadly pistol-shot had apparently roused an entire camp.

Suddenly they charged down upon the representative of Silver Bow society with yells that made the air tremble.

"We proceed ter bizness," said the Rattler.

"Stand yer ground, George!"

The next instant the revolvers opened on the Sioux, who tumbled right and left as they were struck by the bullets, not one of which appeared to be thrown away.

"It's a picnic worthy ther occasion!" laughed the Happy Rattler. "Come on, you red devils! While I loafed around Silver Bow I turned ter handle ther droppers."

His rapid firing seemed to paralyze the Indians, but he might empty the twelve chambers with deadly effect, and then have a score of enemies to overcome.

He did this.

With the last shot the foremost Sioux bounded forward with a yell on his lips, and fell dead, his scalp-lock almost touching the donkey's feet.

"It's hand ter hand now!" grated the Happy Rattler, shutting his teeth hard, and whipping out a ten-inch bowie. "I'm a trump card with this toothpick, my amiable daisies. Jes' let me illustrate!" and he made a grab over the back of the donkey at the nearest Indian.

A desperate encounter was imminent, for the man from Silver Bow was no mean antagonist, but help was at hand.

All at once, at the crack of a rifle whose bullet whizzed past the Rattler's ear, the red-skin with whom he was about to grapple staggered back.

Then another and still another shared the same fate, until the rest recoiled, with mad eyes staring at the friends who had come to the white man's assistance.

"Jehosaphat! who's helpin' me?" exclaimed the Rattler, wheeling upon the unexpected reinforcement. "Blast my peepers! if it isn't ther gail!"

Yes, a few rods up the trail and elevated so that she could fire over the Rattler's head, stood Zoe Sutter, filling the Sioux with consternation with the repeating rifle, which she worked with the ease of a finished marksman.

Back from those deadly bullets the Indians recoiled, and the man from Silver Bow leaped upon the back of the donkey and suddenly urged him toward Zoe at the top of his speed.

Panting and excited, he halted before the fair girl and sprang to the ground.

"You're a trump!" he exclaimed. "I'll raise Ferd Sutter another fifty thousand when I run across him ag'in. Didn't we drop 'em, my gentle pigeon?"

CHAPTER XXIII.

GOLDSBUR ON DECK AGAIN.

WE go back to You Bet, the Sioux-raided town on the Northern Pacific.

The reader will remember that when last there, we left Lola, the Poker Queen, kneeling beside Crimson Con, who had lost his life in a vain attempt to recover from the depths of the Black Bonanza shaft the laced hat of his enemy, Hercules Goldspur.

Lola did not remain long at Con's side when she found that he was dead.

She sprang up and went to the shaft.

Her hand had severed the rope at Con's request, and it had fallen into the abyss, thus depriving Hercules, if he still remained alive, of his last hope of escape.

Lola longed to look into the gloomy depths of the chasm; but her eyes, piercing though they were, were not equal to the task.

"The mountain eagle will never tear another throat!" she said, while her eyes flashed. "He has torn his last one, and his soft talons will molder in the crease of the mine. Now Lola will go back to Zoe's trail. She will find the girl and take her to her father and claim his love."

Lola, the Mexican, then, loved Ferdinand Sutter!

She hoped to gain his love by restoring Zoe to his arms, and for his affection she was willing to do anything—to kill, even.

She did not leave the brink of the shaft until she had listened intently there for many minutes, during which time not a sound came up to her ears.

Perhaps Crimson Con had finished the giant he had found in the shaft.

Lola knew that a desperate struggle had taken place between the two men.

Con's tattered clothes and lacerated throat were proof of this.

"Dead! thank Heaven! dead, to molest me no more," she said, rising and leaving the mine. "A *Dois!* Senor Hercules."

She turned away with a glance at the dead man stretched out in the moonlight, his gaping throat hideous even at that weird hour.

She went to the edge of the town and there mounted the horse that had brought her thither.

"Now for Zoe—this time not to fail," she cried.

In another minute she had put You-Bet behind her, her thoughts not on the secret of the Black Bonanza mine, but on the victory she expected to achieve by restoring Zoe to her father's arms.

If she could have penetrated the dark depths of the shaft, the sight she would have encountered would have distended her dark eyes.

In the water at the foot of the shaft stood a stalwart man with flashing eyes and clinched hands.

"I can't do it!" he exclaimed, looking at the coil of rope he held in one hand. "I can't throw this rope two hundred feet toward the stars and up a narrow shaft like this. Somebody cut the rope just ez I war about to foller Crimson Con. Ov course it war Lola, fer Con himself hadn't strength left to do it. Jehu! didn't I leave my finger marks in his throat? It war tough ez bull-hide, but I tore it! Wanted my hat, didn't be?" And the man in the water laughed. "A chap what tackles me fer my hat's a blamed fool. But I must get out ov this."

He leaned against one of the sides of the shaft and felt it with his hands.

It was not very smooth, but there were no niches to help him out.

"I can't git that tussle out o' my head," he went on to himself. "Ov course Con thought me dead, er he wouldn't hev ventured down hyer on the rope. When he fired at me, the bullet grazin' my head staggered me back inter the shaft; but I managed to catch ther ecce fer a minute, but I couldn't hold on. Down I fell, an' ef it hadn't been fer the ladders thet hed lodged crosswise in ther shaft, I wouldn't be

hyer breathin' now. It war Goldspur's luck—tact's all. When I saw Con comin' down hand over hand, I remarked gently ter myself thet thar war one hat he'd never wear, an' wear it he never shall! It war a lively fight, fur Crimson Con war no slouch. A grittier man I never tackled afore. Goldspur, ye must git out ov hyer. Zoe must be found. Lola doesn't know whar she is. She robbed me, an' then somebody robbed her. Turn about's fair play."

More than once during his self-communings The Man of the Velvet Hand looked wistfully at the stars.

They were numerous and far away, and their scintillations seemed to mock his situation.

"By the eternal heavens! I'm goin' ter leave this place!" he cried.

But without assistance he could not escape from that shaft, and nobody knew it better than Goldspur himself.

Still he did not despair.

He fished in the water with his hands and succeeded in standing one of the heavy ladders against the wall of the shaft.

Then he mounted it to the top and felt the wall as far up as he could reach.

"I wish somebody else would come down hyer after my hat," he suddenly laughed. "But I guess nobody wants it on the tarms I gave Crimson Con."

He did not hear Lola's adieu, nor the sound of her horse's hoofs as she rode away from You-Bet.

He stood on the ladder with his face still upturned to the stars, not hopeless, but with a head full of plans for vengeance and final triumph in the future.

Men like Hercules Goldspur never wholly despair.

He felt the night wearing away while he stood on the ladder, several feet above the water in which his terrible fight with Crimson Con had taken place.

All at once he heard a noise that startled him.

"Is Lola waiting for me up yonder?" he exclaimed. "Does she think that I still live? Some one's up there. I know it."

Suddenly a dark object blotted out the light of a star, and remained for several minutes poised over the edge of the shaft.

"Mebbe it's a b'ar," said Hercules Goldspur, as he regarded the object. "Ther old chap must feel kind o' lonely in You-Bet. Ef I war up thar he'd hev company."

But it was not a grizzly.

Over the edge of the shaft leaned a human figure half-naked to the waist, and with a tuft of feathers for a head-dress.

It was an Indian, and hither and thither behind him, from cabin to cabin, flitted a dozen more, like specters through the moonlight.

The Sioux had come back to the place they had plundered.

Perhaps they thought there were more scalps for them there, but the only one within their reach was the one that still clung to Crimson Con's head.

"Come down, old feller, an' give me a tussle!" suddenly shouted Goldspur to the object he had taken for a bear. "Thar's a hat hyer if ye want it—ther one Con didn't git!"

Instantly the figure was withdrawn, but three minutes later the man on the ladder saw a dozen like objects arranged around the edge of the shaft.

"Injuns!" he ejaculated.

"Who down there?" suddenly cried a voice in the unmistakable tones of the red-skin.

"Who am I?" he answered. "Hercules Goldspur. Throw down a rope. It'll take a long one, but thar ar' plenty ov 'em in You-Bet."

Several exclamations of astonishment greeted his words.

"Indians git brother out ov big hole!" cried one. "Him no die down there."

"That's clever; an' ef I don't do you red pards a good turn some day, set me down fer a Greaser."

The disappearance of all but several heads told Goldspur that a search was being made for a rope long enough to extricate him from the shaft, and he waited the result with much impatience.

At last a shout greeted his ears, and told him that a rope had been found.

"Hyer comes deliverance!" he exclaimed, as he heard a rope creeping down the mine. "Who ever thought that a lot ov sneakin' Injuns would save Goldspur's life?"

He watched the snake-like object that dangled between him and the stars, and made ready to seize it at the first opportunity.

Nearer and nearer it came, and at last with a cry of delight, he grasped it with both hands and quickly wound it around his body.

"Pull, my red pards," he sent up to the Indians above. "I'm fixed fer ther ascent an' I long ter begin their hunt fer Zoe."

The Sioux did pull, and Hercules Goldspur soon found himself leaving the depths of the mine by the last means through which he had expected deliverance.

Crushed over his face was the laced sombrero which had cost one man his life, and protruding above his belt was the hilt of a bowie which

he had fished from the depths of the Black Bonanza.

As he neared the top, he held his breath.

Unseen red-skins were pulling with all their might, and several pairs of keen eyes were watching for him with savage eagerness.

Suddenly he threw one hand up to catch the solid edge of the shaft, when a red hand seized it, and the Indian pulled hard.

This was assistance unexpected, but The Man of the Velvet Hand did not disdain it, but aided by the red-skin, drew himself up on the solid ground, and throwing the rope away stood erect before the fifteen savages who had rescued him.

"It is Velvet Hand!" exclaimed several savages.

"Didn't I tell you so afore you began ter pull me up?" said Hercules, whose eyes glittered like diamonds. "I gave ye fair warnin' who ye war pullin' up afore you stretched the rope with this individual at ther end ov it. Hello! who's thet? Crimson Con, by hokey!"

A stride carried him to the man on the ground, and a look told him the result of the fight at the bottom of the shaft.

"I did thet!" he said, turning to the Indians. "Ther fool wanted my sombrero, but," with a laugh, "he didn't git it!"

He stepped back a pace as the Sioux started toward him, and drew his splendid figure to its true height.

"Stand whar ye ar'!" he cried, with a fearless man's defiance, as his right hand waved them back. "I don't want the blood of any one who saved my life. Go back to your own trails. I have one ov my own ter tread, an' I'm goin' ter tread it alone. I want no Injun with me. You want no pale-face with you."

The red-skins stopped, and stared at the giant.

"Accept ther thanks ov Hercules Goldspur," he went on. "From this night he will never shed the blood ov a Sioux. He swears it with uplifted hand. The warriors who pulled him from the Black Bonanza have made him ther friend of their nation. When we meet again, we'll meet ez friends."

There was no reply.

Were these the same Indians who had attacked him the night he left You-Bet with Zoe—the red-skins whose comrades he had shot right and left in the mountain pass?

"Peace or war—which shall it be?" he exclaimed. "Shall it be shake or fight? Decide an' that blamed quick, fer I've got bizaess elsewhar!"

Suddenly one Indian sprang from the spell-bound group.

"Red Snake speaks for all. It shall be peace between Velvet Hand an' the Sioux."

A smile came to the corners of Goldspur's mouth.

"Peace it is, then. Good-by, my new pards. I go back to the trail I hoped ter strike by comin' hyar."

"Sioux hunt with white brother."

"With me for Zoe?—never!" flashed the giant. "I go alone. Woe to the man, friend or foe, that follers me on this trail!"

Stepping back as he finished, he waved the astonished red-skins a farewell and deliberately turned his back upon them and walked off.

"I couldn't any more than thank 'em," he laughed. "Thar they stan' like gapin' gophers. Shoot me in the back? not much! Much as Hercules Goldspur hates a red-skin thar's peace forever twixt him an' all Sittin' Bull's pards."

Half a mile beyond the suburbs of You-Bet Goldspur stopped, and suddenly threw his laced hat high in mid-air accompanying the action with an ejaculation of delight.

"I feel like the mornin' star!" he exclaimed. "Look out, Lola, Cold-Deck, the Rattler—all ov ye! I'm on deck ag'in. Ther velvet hand hezn't lost its grip. I don't stop this side of Zoe!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE TRAIL TO ZOE.

"Is it to be an interminable hunt? That slippery villain got away with his secret, and Zoe my child is still lost to me."

"I wish now that I had crippled him. I had him at my rifle's mercy, but I spared the wretch, for I did not think he could give us the slip on that sleepy donkey. But we will find him again. Do not give up your child as irretrievably lost. We cannot be far from the Happy Rattler. I have embarked on this hunt to find Zoe for you. Cold-Deck Carl cannot be baffled. We will find Zoe, an' by heaven! I will drive a ball through the head ov the Man from Silver Bow."

Sutter's eyes brightened.

The escape of the Rattler after the events lately enacted, his demand for the reward and his failure to obtain it, had cast the Arizonian's spirits down.

He had cause for thinking that his long life-hunt would never end.

Cold-Deck Carl had sworn to find Zoe for him, but days had passed away since the oath, and she was still lost to him.

He now believed that his child was in the

Happy Rattler's power, but where he did not know.

After the dead beat's escape, they had hunted for Zoe but without success.

If the Rattler sometimes played the fool, he was a shrewd, calculating rascal, and had managed to conceal his hiding-place an' Zoe's from eyes as sharp as Carl's, than whom there was no better tracker in the Northwest.

It was a week after the Rattler's failure to force from Sutter at the revolver's muzzle a promise of two hundred thousand dollars' reward for Zoe's safe return to his arms that the words that open this chapter fell from the rancher's tongue.

He and Cold-Deck Carl were alone, but not unwatched.

Crouched among some bushes above their mountain camp was a human figure whose eyes blazed as he watched.

"They haven't got Zoe yet," passed his lips. "I'm a mean man fer doin' what I hev done, but when I took Zoe from You-Bet I wasn't ready to give her up to him. I have terms to make with Ferd Sutter. Why no' make 'em now!"

The speaker looked at Cold-Deck Carl as he finished.

"We never can get along, Cold-Deck. Somehow or other thar must be eternal war between you an' me. Hello! thar goes that peculiar call ag'in!"

The man was no less a person than Hercules Goldspur, and he threw a rapid glance over his shoulder as he uttered the concluding sentence.

A noise like the peculiar cry of a night bird had fallen upon his ears, and when he looked down on the camp again he saw that Ferdinand Sutter, the rancher, was the only person at the fire.

"That war no bird," he ejaculated. "Cold-Deck heard the signal ov a pard, an' hyer he comes to ther conference."

Sure enough, Cold-Deck Carl had left the camp and was advancing toward Goldspur's retreat.

There was a gleam of victory in the eyes of the gambler.

The call was a signal, not the notes of a nocturnal bird.

With eager eyes Hercules Goldspur watched the schemer as he came nearer and nearer, and saw him pass so near to his place of concealment that he could have touched him with his silken band.

"Now's my chance fer a private talk with Sutter," he said. "But no! I'm goin' ter see what kind ov a bird called Cold-Deck."

Instead of descending into the camp where the rancher stood at his fire thoughtful and silent, he followed Cold-Deck Carl so noiselessly that the sport was totally unaware of the espionage.

Carl led Hercules Goldspur down a narrow trail, and The Man of the Velvet Hand at last leaned over a huge bowlder and saw two figures standing almost directly beneath him in the fading twilight of a summer day.

"It's a red bird!" fell from his lips as he made out the figure of the tall and stately red-skin who faced Cold-Deck Carl. "Hang me ef he doesn't resemble the head Injun what helped me out ov ther Black Bonanza a few days back, but then all reds look alike arter sundown."

"So you're sure thet you've struck the right trail?" said the gambler-sport to his companion.

"When did Red Fox fail to find the quarry?" was the answer as the Indian shrugged his shoulders. "He can trail better than his white brothers. They have been huntin' long time for the lost child of the pale-face; but Red Fox him put his foot on the right trail pretty soon."

"She is in the Rattler's hands?"

"Yes. The yellow snake keeps her."

"But he shall soon give her up!" grated the sport. "Curse his face! I propose to spoil it with a bullet, Red Fox. I had him at my mercy the other day, but like a fool I let him go unwinged. The next time I'll know better. Is he near?"

"Not far off. Red Fox soon find him, and girl."

How the eyes of Hercules Goldspur glittered while he listened to these words.

Cold-Deck Carl had found an Indian ally.

By promising a reward tempting to the red-skin he had secured the services of a trailer who had scented out Zoe's hiding-place.

"Is my brother ready with the gold he promised Red Fox?" asked the Indian.

"It shall be yours," said Cold-Deck Carl biting his lip. "Show me the girl."

The Sioux appeared to recoil an inch.

"Was that the bargain?" exclaimed Red Fox. "Was Red Fox to show his brother the white girl first?"

"Don't flare up about it," almost hissed the gambler-sport. "I won't go an' quarrel with yer. The wealth shall be yours when I know where Zoe is. You have found her, you say. Red Fox, how do I know this?"

Instantly the eyes of the Indian seemed to become flashing stars.

"Does Red Fox lie?" he cried. "Does the white man doubt his word? Red Fox must have the gold first—"

"I can't give it up before I see Zoe. By heavens! if you want independence you'll find some in me! I'm Cold Deck Carl, an' I don't care a continental for your discovery. I can find Zoe with a little more time. I made a fair bargain with you. I am willin' ter stan' by it. You ar' the man who wants to break it. Keep yer secret, then!"

Goldspur saw the gambler sport step back with an independence that astonished him.

The red-skin looked at him in amazement.

"Ob, go an' break the contract," cried Cold-Deck. "I'll do my own trailing."

He pointed down the mountain-trail as he spoke, and flashed defiance in the Indian's face.

"Good! Red Fox will go!" was the reply. "He has found the lost white girl, but he will not tell his white brother who keeps back the yellow money."

"Yes—go! When I trust another Injun, thar'll be an airtquake!"

Cold-Deck Carl turned his back on his hired trailer, and avoided the Indian's blazing eyes.

Only Hercules Goldspur saw them, and he saw the red skin's hand glide to the hatchet in his belt; but he did not draw it forth.

For a moment the two men stood but three feet apart on the mountain trail, and then the Sioux wheeled.

"Red Fox is gone! Let the white man find the lost star of the pale-faces."

"By the eternal gods, I will!" thundered Cold-Deck Carl. "You nor the dead-beat from Silver Bow shall baffle me in the game I play ag'in' all mankind!"

He said no more, and Goldspur from his station saw Red Fox walk away with all the haughtiness he was capable of displaying.

Without a word Cold-Deck Carl watched the red-skin disappear around a bend in the trail.

"I'll make this the cheapest secret I ever purchased!" Goldspur heard him hiss. "That red Greaser shan't get the best of Cold-Deck Carl! I've trailed Injuns afore, an' this sharp trader shan't beat me!"

The gambler sport took a hasty stride in the direction taken by the Indian, and the eyes of The Man of the Velvet Hand caught the glitter of the cocked revolver he carried at his side.

"Two can trail one Injun at a time, Cold-Deck," he smiled, as he lowered himself over a rock that had sheltered him, and dropped like a cat upon the trail. "We'll see who pays their most fer Red Fox's secret—you er me!"

If Cold Deck Carl had looked over his shoulder at that moment he might have caught sight of the human panther that had thrown himself upon his trail; but he thought only of the Indian gliding down the mountain-path a short distance in advance of him.

"I'll make Red Fox show me where Zoe is!" he said to himself. "He shall take me to my future prize, whether he wants to or not."

Hercules Goldspur carried no weapons in his hand as he hastened after Cold Deck Carl over the path which was as hard as a floor, but gave forth no sounds.

"I'm goin' ter foller that red ter Zoe, not you Cold-Deck," he said to himself. "You ar' between me an' ther Injun. Git out ov my way."

The last five words ended in a hiss, and the several eager strides that carried Goldspur forward landed him within arm's length of Cold-Deck Carl.

All at once his hand fell like a trip hammer upon the gambler-sport's shoulder and a low triumphant laugh parted Goldspur's lips as he whirled upon him.

"You!" ejaculated Cold-Deck Carl.

"Yes, me! Them Injuns didn't want you very bad when I flung you to 'em. Now ye've jined hands with a red. Want Zoe, eh, my Poker King? Thar's another fellow in ther same box, an' it's Hercules Goldspur. Follerin' Red Fox, hev? Goin' ter git his secret cheap, I s'pose? But I'm goin' ter buy it at ther same price, Cold-Deck!"

There was the quick dart of a hand at a human throat and Cold Deck Carl felt the silken fingers of Hercules Goldspur close behind his windpipe, while his revolver fell from his nerveless hand!

"I'll foller ther Injun, not you, Cold-Deck," was heard in his ear. "This hand ov mine hezn't forgot ther grip that always wins. It's fifty feet an' more to ther trail below this one. I'll be yer down gently. I always handle precious packages with care."

Despite his strength, Carl could do nothing in the grip of the blind Hercules.

He could not speak but his eyes could flash in his face the unspoken hatred of a desperado's nature.

Hercules Goldspur pushed him to the edge of the trail which was slightly bench-fringed and narrow.

Cold Deck Carl made one effort to wrench himself from the vise-like grip of Goldspur, but the attempt proved futile.

He found himself at the edge of the trail.

The velvet hand at his throat had paralyzed every nerve.

Suddenly his feet seemed to give way beneath him, and then, as his brain whirled and dark-

ness overshadowed all things, he fell down—down to doom.

His escape would prove a miracle seldom wrought among the everlasting hills.

"Now fer the red!" said Goldspur springing down the trail again. "Cold-Deck warn't a hard man ter manage. What will ther Indian be?"

His struggle with the gambler-sport had occupied five minutes, and Red Fox had had time to get over a good little strip of trail.

He might have become alarmed and left it altogether, but the victor did not despair.

All at once he stopped and fixed his eyes on a human figure that stood statue-like between him and the stars.

"It's ther red," he said to himself, and then he heard the Indian's voice.

"The white-face may follow Red Fox to find the pale girl's lodge. He shall not find it. There are other trails which Red Fox can travel, an' lead him from it. He will give the white man a false scent to follow."

"You will, eh?" grinned Hercules Goldspur when he saw the Sioux dart to one side, and suddenly disappear from the trail. "Hold up, my scarlet seraph! You can't baffle me."

He almost ran toward the spot deserted by the Indian and gained it to find a thread of a path just visible among the star gleams.

He did not stop but glided after the wary red.

Zoe's fortunes were at stake.

Three minutes later a hand encircled the red-skin's naked arm, and the man with whom he was suddenly and forcibly brought face to face, said with a laugh that had a terrible meaning.

"Beat me if you kin, Injun. I buy my secrets at my own price. Show me whar Zoe is. Go back ter the old trail, or I leave yer hyer fer ther buzzards. Take yer choice. Live er die!"

Red Fox knew his man.

His look told Goldspur that he was recognized.

"The eagle with the terrible talons has caught the Sioux fox," he said. "But what does the red-man know about another trail?"

"Not tally, red dy," cried the giant.

"Cold-Deck Carl has changed his mind. I've taken his place. You know whar Zoe is. I heard all back on ther trail. Lie to Hercules Goldspur an' he'll choke yer peepers out ov yer head. To Zoe! Ther's ther cry."

His grip tightened on Red Fox's arm as he forced him to the wider trail, and when he struck it the Sioux looked into his face.

"Red Fox will go to the rancher's child."

"That's bizness. Ther Sioux an' me ar' at peace, but"—Goldspur ground his teeth—"you kin break that peace mighty easy ter-night. Zoe! Zoe! I'm comin' back! I've taken two more tricks ter-night. Thar's only one more left!"

CHAPTER XXV.

KICKED OUT OF TIME.

NOT for a moment did Hercules Goldspur relinquish his grip on the Indian's arm.

As for the Sioux, he eyed the giant furtively, but made no effort to break loose from the hand that possessed a grip of iron.

"How far is it ter Zoe?" asked Goldspur, burning with impatience.

"White girl pretty near," said the red-skin.

"Is she alone?"

"No."

"Who's with her?"

"A pale-face."

"Ha! The Happy Rattler," exclaimed Goldspur. "Wal, I'll rattle him."

For more than two hours Red Fox led the giant up one mountain trail and down another.

Many a man in Goldspur's boots would have thought that the Sioux was deceiving him, but the laced westerner knew that he was not.

Hercules Goldspur knew Indian character well.

He had passed enough of his life among the red-skins to read, as it were, the Sioux's thoughts.

He might have removed his hand from the Indian's arm and yet trusted him.

At length the red-man stopped.

"We are at the bird's nest, white-face," he said.

Goldspur looked ahead, and on every side, but saw no indications of being near a human habitation.

As the Sioux watched him, a curious expression came to his face.

"White-face does not own the eyes of the eagle," he said.

"No man does," said Hercules. "Show me Zoe."

Red Fox turned Goldspur's hand and crept away, closely followed by the giant.

He proceeded some distance down the trail and halted before what appeared a solid wall, overhung with mountain vines.

The next moment the Sioux's hand raised a curtain of vines, and without a word pointed into a dark opening revealed by the action.

Goldspur's eyes blazed with victory, and was

about to leap into the cavern, when Red Fox's hand held him back.

"Pale-face may be in there," he said.

"What if he is?" exclaimed Goldspur. "A thousand Happy Rattlers don't daunt me. I've got a hand that never forgets its cunwin' an' never goes back on its master."

He dashed the Indian's hand down and sprung into the opening.

"I am hyer fer Zoe!" he grated. "Woe to the man who stands between her an' me."

His bound carried him six feet beyond the threshold of the mountain den.

The ceiling was some distance above his head, but he could have touched the sides of the corridor with his hands.

He did not pause until he reached a large room partly illumined by a fire that smoldered on the earthen floor.

The sight of the embers made him halt.

"Zoe, I am hyer!" he exclaimed. "Zoe, my bird, Hercules is back!"

There was no response save the mad cry that burst from his own throat.

"Is she not hyer? Hez ther red skin lied?"

He caught up a brand and with a little exertion secured a flame that the better illumined the room.

A glance told Goldspur that the cavern had been lately inhabited, and a look showed him that it was now empty.

A cry that might have welled from the throat of a baffled tiger parted his lips and with a curse he threw the brand upon the floor.

"They have taken ther trick ther belonged to me; but they shall not keep it!" he cried. "Zoe, by the holy heavens I will find you!"

Back toward the entrance he turned eager to find the trail of the Arizonian's daughter.

He did not expect to find the Indian where he had left him, but strange to say Red Fox was at his post, a half questioning look on his stolid countenance.

"Wal, I found—nothin'!" said Hercules. "The lost star of Arizony is gone!"

The Sioux started slightly.

"I don't blame you, Injun," continued Hercules. "You hev played fair ef you did it under compulsion. You thought Zoe war hyer; but ther Rattler war too much fer ye. Let us find the trail."

Down on his knees went the Sioux and in the starlight his keen eyes began to examine the ground.

Goldspur with folded arms, and proudly erect, watched him until he looked up.

"No trail," laconically reported the Indian.

"Thar must be one."

"Let white-face look, then."

"No. I never pit my eyes ag'in' a fox's—it's no use," smiled Hercules. "But when I say thar must be a trail, ov course I mean that thar is one. Ther Rattler ar' no bird; neither is Zoe. Ther trail must be found, red dy."

"Mebbe cave have back trail."

"We'll see."

Into the cavern rushed Goldspur, this time followed by the Indian who seemed eager to find Zoe.

The discarded firebrand was called into requisition again, and for some minutes the two pards searched the underground cavern with a fidelity that seemed to command success.

At the end of the hunt the Indian touched Goldspur's arm and showed by his look that he was nonplused.

"Wherever they ar' I will find 'em," said the giant finally.

"Can Red Fox hunt, too?"

"With me?"

"With his white brother."

"Wal, I never hed a red pard, an' I don't see thet I want one now, but, seein' thet you want ter help me, I'll take you, Injun."

Red Fox held out his hand which was quickly seized by the giant and cordially grasped.

"Ef you think Cold-Deck is still on deck, an' thet he'll trail you, you fool yerself," said Goldspur. "Ov course men hev some strange escapes, but his warn't one ov 'em. I dropped Cold Deck over some hard rock, an' I guess he's whar he struck yet. We ar' pards, I believe! Now fer ther first duty. We must find Zoe!"

Hercules Goldspur turned once more toward the mouth of the cavern, and as he sprang beyond the threshold and showed his stalwart figure to the stars, an almost boisterous laugh saluted his ears.

At the first notes the giant wheeled with cocked revolver.

"Since Zoe ain't at home ag'in, I needn't come nigher," said the laugher. "Hercules, who do you think did it this time?"

There was no mistaking the voice.

Once heard it could not be forgotten, and it was not necessary for the possessor of it to show himself to be recognized.

"I know you," shouted Hercules, striding toward the laugher. "No, sir, Zoe is not hyer. Stand whar ye ar', Rattler. You an' Goldspur will settle their accounts right hyer."

More than one hundred yards separated the two men; the man from Silver Bow was elevated slightly above the trail running past the cavern, and if the giant did not see him, his voice located him.

"To kill ther skunk first, an' find Zoe afterward—thet's my duty," hissed Hercules to himself.

He was moving with rapid strides toward the Happy Rattler when a stern voice bade him halt.

"What's yer intentions?" asked the Man from Silver Bow over the leveled rifle that covered Hercules. "What's thet ye said 'bout settlin' accounts? Jes' repeat yer words. Mebbe this sage chick didn't git ther right grip on 'em."

There was grim humor in the voice, but it was stern enough to admonish Goldspur that he was advancing headlong upon a battery manned by a man who had little regard for human life.

The game was all in Happy Rattler's hands; he held the life of the Idaho Hercules at the mercy of his trigger.

Goldspur halted.

His fingers tightened around the revolver he carried at his side, and now that he saw his peril, the rifle and the cool desperado behind it, he seemed about to recoil.

"Go on!" whispered a voice at his feet. "The eye of Red Fox covers the Rattler!"

A moment later without warning, Hercules Goldspur sprang forward relying on the eagle eye and steady hand of the new pard.

There was a sharp rifle crack, and the laced sombrero of he of the velvet hand was lifted from the raven hair, but the giant rushed on.

Ere he could reach the Happy Rattler an animal pushed himself between the two men, and as a pistol shot rung out behind Hercules Goldspur, a pair of hoofs struck him in the breast, and he was lifted clear of the ground!

Kicking George had rushed to his master's rescue, and with stunning effect so far as Goldspur was concerned, for twenty feet from the spot where the donkey had planted his feet in the chest of the giant, a stalwart man lay senseless and apparently dead across the trail.

The victor of the brief combat, the innocent-looking donkey, stood his ground until a man near by staggered toward him, and threw a leg across the saddle.

"Thet war ther boss kick ov yer life, pard! It histed Hercules Goldspur clear ov ther ground, an' played smart with his constitution. But his pard got me. I guess we'll never become bonanza princes at Silver Bow. I won't, anyhow, George. You may kick yer way through ther world; but I'm wiped out."

The speaker turned the donkey's head up the mountain, and dug his heels into his flanks with a madman's fury.

Away went the beast at the top of his speed while an Indian bent over the giant lying across the trail and laid a red hand upon his heart.

"Did you get 'im, Fox?" were the first words that passed Goldspur's lips as he met the Sioux's gaze.

"Red Fox forget white-face." And away bounded the red-skin to return in a moment with a report that made Goldspur grind his teeth.

"Got away, eh?" he growled.

The Sioux did not speak, but held his hand up in a position that made Hercules Goldspur observe the glistening blood that stained it.

"Whose blood?" asked the giant.

"White shooter's."

"His! I'd sooner hev spilled thet infernal mule's! As a kickin'-machine, Injun, thet animal's a grand success!"

Anybody but a savage would have smiled at Goldspur's lugubrious countenance, but the Sioux's face did not relax.

"Euchered by a mule, Red Fox!" continued the giant. "Kicked out o' time by a pard thet can't talk. Let it be a secret fer you an' Hercules Goldspur. Ef you blow it, I'll kill you!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE SILVER BOW PARDS AGAIN.

FORTUNATE it was for the Idaho giant that the Happy Rattler's four-footed pard had not elevated his heels a few inches higher, and planted them squarely in his face.

Had this occurred the end of Goldspur's hunt for Zoe would have been reached when he least expected it.

He did not recover from his warm reception by Kicking George until the man from Silver Bow was far from the scene of the transaction.

"Tell an' I'll give ye a passport ter Injun heaven," he said more than once to the Sioux. "Kicked out ov time by a mule! It'd disgrace a Digger Injun. Whar is ther Rattler did you sav, red dy? Blood on ther grass! Let me see it."

Hercules Goldspur went to the spot occupied by the Rattler during the brief and almost fatal encounter just witnessed, and assisted by the Indian found blood-stains on the trail.

"You hit him, Fox!" he exclaimed. "You winged the Rattler. But wait till I git my fingers on him; wait till Hercules Goldspur grips his yallar throat. He knows whar Zoe is."

"No," and Red Fox shook his head. "Him not know, big white-face."

"How do you know?"

"From what him say."

Goldspur did not reply for a moment.

"Whar is she, then?" he suddenly ejaculated. "Let white-face think. If girl did not run away who would steal her."

"Who stole her before? Lola!" exclaimed Goldspur. "Is it possible that that Mexican witch is still at work—that she robbed the man who robbed her at ther revolver's muzzle? It was she who cut the rope in the Black Bonanza an' left me ter perish thar. Look out, Lola! I'm comin'—comin' like a cyclone!"

The two pards went back to the mine, but could discover no clew to Zoe's whereabouts.

"If she went through the air, I'll find her!" he said grinding his teeth. "I'll git thar, red-skin."

The gray dawn of another day was appearing among the mountains when the Idaho giant reached a certain point in an elevated trail and leaned against a huge boulder alongside of it.

He was alone, and the first rays of the sun made the lace glisten on his sombrero.

Armed with two revolvers and a bowie whose hilt stuck above his hat, he looked improved in appearance despite the blow he had received at the heels of the Happy Rattler's pard.

What had become of Red Fox, the Indian?

If the red skin was near he was not to be seen, and the keen eye of the eagle could not have singled him out.

Goldspur's position was a goodly distance from the cavern which he and Red Fox had reached only to find it deserted, and if he was on a trail he was pursuing it with a great deal of leisure.

The trail that ran at his feet soon lost itself among the intricacies of the mountain, but the giant did not seem in any hurry to take it up again.

"Nothin' yet," he said to himself. "No Zoe, no Red Fox, no nothin'. Ther Happy Rattler even doesn't show his beautiful physiognomy, an' thet infernal kickin'-machine called George keeps out ov my way."

The giant's anger rose as he spoke the last sentence, and he clinched his hands in a spasm of rage.

"Thet mule! Don't I want ter fix 'im?" he went on. "I hate 'im worse than I hate his master. One ov these days—Hello! what's thet?"

A start forward and then a quick halt which opened wide the giant's eyes followed the interruption.

The object that had encountered his gaze was an animal that had appeared on a little plateau further down the mountain.

A second look brought an exclamation of satisfaction to Goldspur's lips.

"Not Zoe, but that kickin'-machine! Now ef I don't git even with thet counter-smasher, put me down fer a fool."

He started toward the donkey, which was quietly nipping the grass below him, and totally unconscious of his presence.

The welfare of the Rattler's pard was at stake, for there was dire vengeance in the sport's eyes.

Nearer and nearer he crept to the donkey, unwatched, as he thought, by any human being.

He did not see the figure half-buried in the grass about one hundred yards from the mule.

"Great Jehosaphat! ef thar ain't ther big pard!" exclaimed this person. "Can't I see what he's arter? Wants ter pay George back fer kickin' 'im last night. I'll call my pard in."

A peculiar call, which made Hercules Goldspur turn his head, caused the donkey to wheel and move rapidly toward the man in the grass.

With a mad oath the Idaho giant strode forward.

"I'm hyar in person fer a final settlement," he flashed, while his eyes snapped. "Stand! you blamed donkey! Kicked out ov time, I'm hyar all ther same!"

"Hyar, drop me, Hercules," exclaimed the man in the grass, as he exposed his body to the giant's gaze. "I'm ther Happy Rattler from Silver Bow, winged an' without a shootin'-iron. Plant yer bullets inter this sage chick, an' let George go."

Hercules Goldspur stopped short as if he was about to enter a snare of some kind.

The donkey by this time had reached his master, and the two presented a singular picture on the little plateau.

With difficulty the Rattler drew himself up, and leaned over the donkey's saddle with his eyes fastened on the undecided giant.

"Oh, I'm playin' squar," Hercules," he went on. "Thar's a hull in my breast thet's givin' ther last trick ter death. Walk up, my big beau ideal, an' George'll ask yer forgiveness fer thet kick last night."

The Rattler held up both hands with the palms out as he spoke, and The Man with the Velvet Hand advanced again.

When he reached the Rattler's side he saw that he was terribly wounded.

Blood covered the front of his dark shirt, and his face, bronzed no longer, had a pallor that was startling.

"I'm a pieter," smiled the Man from Silver Bow. "You hed a pard last night, Hercules?"

"Yes."

"Wasn't he a red-skin?"

"He war."

"Ther one I saw prowlin' round t'other day. But he didn't git Zoe."

"Ov course he did not."

"Don't you know who did?"

"Lola?"

"Thet she-cat ov Mexico!" growled the Rattler. "It's the first time I war ever robbed by a woman. War you ever kicked by an apparatus like this afore last night, Hercules?"

"There!" said the giant sternly as his brow darkened. "I don't want 'o hear of that ag'in. The first time it war, Rattler, an' Hercules Goldspur hez sworn thet it shall never occur ag'in!"

"Mad at George, I see. Vent yer spite on me. I told George ter kick an' kick he did. I'm ther propeller ov this apparatus. I'm ther chap what laid ye out, not George hyer. You ar' alone, Hercules, an' I'm glad on it. I don't trust an Injun; mebbe you do. Ef I hed got ther drop on yer red pard when I saw 'im rowlin' round ther cave I wouldn't be in this fix now. I had Zoe well in hand when Lola came an' took her. Lola? I know she did it!"

"Whar war you?"

"Away, ov course; but only fer a brief spell. Ov course thet she-panther war on ther alert. She see'd me go an' then her eyes snapped. I struck Ferd Sutter too high, but arterward I war fetchin' him to my tams when his pard Cold Deck Carl got ther drop on my anatomy. Thet girl's a daisy jumper, Hercules. She's worth my tams—two hundred thousand."

"Is that what you wanted fer her?"

"Yes. Kind o' modest warn't it? It would hev sent George an' I back ter Silver Bow bonanza princes with cash enough ter start a farc bank. I've changed my mind. I'm not goin' back ter Silver Bow. George may, but I shall stay hyer."

"With yer boots on, Rattler?"

"Of course. All thet's kept me up thus fur, war hopes of findin' Zoe ag'in, but that's played out. I want you to find her now, Hercules."

"Thet's just what I'm goin' to do," said Hercules.

"You will. Lola gave some ov her plans away ter Zoe. She's dead gone on Sutter, an' she'll never give Zoe up until she sees her way cl'ar ter bein' mistress ov thet Arzony ranch. She'd never hev stuck ter Pigmy Pete, who is dead."

"Dead?" cried Goldspur.

"I ran across ther little pard t'other day. Ther buzzards hed already been ther, but I knowed who killed 'im. He run ag'in' Cold-Deck somewhar, and got his everlastin'. But let me go on. Lola hez played big hands afore now an' won. She will give Zoe back fer Sutter's love, an' ez mistress ov ther ranch she'll beggar them two, father and daughter, afore she lets up. Lola war cut out for a Poker Queen. Ef you an' me could become pards, Hercules—ef thet Injun's bullet had passed a little ter one side, thar yet would be a game played thet would wind up lively."

The Rattler's eyes sparkled as he finished.

"I'll play it out! Thet's what I'm hyer fer," said the Idaho giant.

"Glory halleluyah! But there's one thing you won't do, Hercules?"

"What's thet?"

"You won't avenge me."

"On Red Fox?"

"On thet Injun."

Hercules Goldspur was silent!

"Let him go," continued the Rattler. "George will git even with him if he ever runs across ther red-skin. Last night I had ther drop on ye, but yer Injun pard interfered. Curse thet red-skin! He's spoiled all my plans!"

The Rattler's lips seemed to quiver behind the last words.

"Come, George; we ar' goin' back!" he suddenly exclaimed, as with difficulty he threw himself upon the donkey's back.

"Back whar?" asked Hercules.

"Ter Silver Bow—home," was the answer. "Thar's an old cabin thet stands lonely, waitin' fer its two pards. We b'long thar, George an' I."

"But you can't git thar," and the soft fingers of Goldspur closed gently on the Rattler's arm. "It's a hard fact ter announce, Rattler, but ye'r near ther end ov yer string."

"Me? Nary a bit, Hercules. Three cheers fer Silver Bow. Hooray! hooray! hoo—"

The cheerer reeled in his saddle, while the echoes of the second shout died among the mountain passes, and the sturdy arm of Hercules Goldspur went around him ere he struck the ground.

"You ar' ther man whose throat I've been wantin' ter clutch," he said, gazing down into the Rattler's face. "But now I wouldn't choke ye fer ther world. A dyin' man, though he be my worst enemy, always hits me on a tender spot."

"I'm thet kind ov a sage chick jes' now," whispered the Happy Rattler. "Whar's George? Hyer, old boy." And he threw his arms around his donkey's neck and clung to it. "He's a mule, but he's a daisy jumper, Hercules, an' we've been pards through thick an' thin! With my boots on! Not yet. By the eternal skies!"

I'm not goin' out, like a candle, afore I sees Zoe safe in Ferd Sutter's arms!"

He laughed behind his exclamation, and slapping one hand on Goldspur's shoulder, exclaimed:

"I'll be yer pard yet, Hercules! I've changed my mind about dyin'. Me an' you an' George will be Ther Banded Three ov Idaho. I'm still ther sole an' original Happy Rattler from Silver Bow."

CHAPTER XXVII.

LOLA PLAYS HER HAND.

HERCULES GOLDSBUR looked at the Happy Rattler, whose voice was now strong and firm and not at all like that of a dying man.

"I want ter git ahead ov Lola an' thet cunnin' devil, who got ther drop on me when I had Sutter at my mercy an' war about ter dictate terms to him," continued the Rattler. "Every man's livin' ter get even with some one else. Thet's about ther sum an' substance ov life, Hercules. Ov course I'm winged—pretty badly, too—but a man with a cast-iron constitution allus manages ter pull through. Shake over George's back, fer ther Banded Three ov Idaho!"

The giant took the hand that was poked over the blood-stained saddle, and the Happy Rattler's eyes glittered with genuine delight.

"I ask but one favor, Hercules," continued the winged rough. "Don't let that Injun pard ov yours cross my path. What I can't do, George will, fer the honor ov Silver Bow must be sustained even at ther expense ov a red-skin's spinal column."

"I'll see that thar shall be no collision," said Hercules. "Now, sir, if you will go back to the cave an' rest—"

"Rest?" and the Rattler laughed. "I want ter eucher Lola an' Cold-Deck. Do you know whar Sutter is?"

"I could find him. But we want Zoe first."

"Ov course."

"Let me hunt alone awhile. I say thet you ar' hurt. Man, thar's a bullet somewhar in yer chest thet hez weakened you. You must go to the cave."

"I'll install ye doctor," smiled the Rattler. "If anybody comes sneakin' round George an' me, he'll git kicked to death."

Half an hour later, the tall figure of Goldspur emerged from the cave in the hill, and paused for a moment before the entrance.

"I've made a pard ov the man I wanted ter choke," he laughed aloud. "Who would hev thought it! Hercules Goldspur, if you don't find Zoe soon, Lola will complete her conquest."

With a look back into the mouth of the cavern he started off, the wind fluttering the ends of the lace that encircled his sombrero, and ready for the final game.

He seemed to know whither he was going, for after he had put several mountain miles between him and the cave, he turned abruptly from the trail, and rushing into a small thicket, came suddenly upon a lithe-limbed horse, whose snicker told him that he had been recognized.

"Still on deck," he said, smoothing the animal's arched neck. "We haven't been together for some days, but you've managed to get along, I see. We must hunt the hoof-tracks ov a certain horse. I know 'em. They're somewhar among these mountains. Hold on! Why not go back an' take a look at Sutter's camp first? We will."

Throwing himself into the saddle, Hercules Goldspur urged the horse from the thicket, and was soon dashing along, looking magnificent on the steed's back.

Was he really going back to Sutter's camp, he, the man who had kept Zoe from her father's arms when he could easily have restored her to them?

If he could have looked ahead he would have seen the Arizonian walking up and down over a little stretch of trail worn smooth by his restless feet.

He appeared to be waiting for some one, and as Goldspur drew rein some distance from Sutter, and at a spot where he was not easily noticed, he started suddenly, as though a certain sound had struck his ears.

"Shades ov death! Lola!" fell from the giant's lips as a slight figure came into view.

The rancher sprang forward with a cry of exultation.

"What will the Mexican snake say to him?" ejaculated Goldspur, as he slid to the ground, and leaving his steed where he was, crept forward toward the camp.

"Lola! tell me what you have discovered," cried Sutter as the black-eyed girl came up.

"Where is my child?"

"Safe," was the word that sent a thrill through Goldspur's frame.

"Safe! yes, safe in your clutches," he said. "Now make yer bargain with Ferd Sutter. Give him Zoe fer his love an' all he's worth. Carry out ther bargain, ef ye kin."

Lola's reply to Sutter's eager inquiry seemed to stun him for a second, then he threw a look aloft and exclaimed:

"At last! at last! Heaven, I thank thee!"

My child—my Zoe found at last! Lola, you make me supremely happy."

Goldspur saw the eyes of the Mexican glitter.

"I have found her," she said. "At the risk of my life I tore her from the clutches of one man to be robbed by another. Then I robbed him in return, and, senor, I have Zoe safe."

"Show me to her. I long to embrace her and take her back to the old ranch. Stolen years and years ago, but found at last! More than the reward I offered for her shall be yours, girl. Draw on Ferd Sutter to an unlimited extent. I'll cash every draft. Zoe! Zoe! at last! at last!"

The joy of the man was unbounded, and he suddenly seized Lola's arm.

"Why don't you take me to Zoe?" he exclaimed. "You forget that I am her father. To Zoe! My God! girl, are you mad?"

"No, senor; but I would sooner bring Zoe to you."

"Is she far away?"

"No."

"What's the difference if you guide me to her? The ground burns under my feet."

An eager gleam took possession of Lola's eyes at that moment, and the hasty glance thrown around told her that she and the Arizonian were the only occupants of the camp.

"Senor, Lola has hunted for you a long time," she said, looking into Sutter's anxious face. "She and Pigmy Pete have been your trailers for many months. They have searched for Zoe with the zeal of bloodhounds; they have tracked her from town to town; they have never let grass grow under their feet. I have played with armed men over every card-table in the Northwest, hoping to find a trace of your child among them. With the diamonds you gave me I have bluffed the wildest devils of the silver camps. I have done this for you, not because I wanted the money you offer for Zoe's return, for I don't want it. I have won enough to make me a gold queen where gold is king. Lola hasn't hunted for you for money. She has said that she would restore Zoe for a reward of a different kind. A thousand times she has vowed this to herself, not even intrusting Pigmy Pete with the secret. Senor, the time has come at last. Zoe has been found, but the reward must first be promised. I have not tracked and played and fought for nothing."

To these words Sutter listened spellbound. Not once did he interrupt the Poker Queen. She looked like a person who had reached a long-sought goal at last.

With flashing eyes and a bosom heaving with passion, she stood before the rancher, holding the fate of long-lost Zoe in her hands.

"Ther Rattler war right," ejaculated Hercules Goldspur. "She's goin' ter play her best card now."

"I am at the end of my trail if you say so," Lola went on, addressing Sutter who had not spoken since her last pause. "I must make a confession. Ferdinand Sutter I gave my heart to you long ago. When you came to me and put your diamonds into my hands, saying, 'Go and find my child,' I said: 'I will give him Zoe for his love.' For this I have worked, for this mingled with the roughs of the North. It is for your love that I ask to-day. Tell me that your ranch shall become my home. Tell Lola that the roof that shall henceforth shelter Zoe shall shelter her also. Tell her that you will make her your wife. Then your child shall leap into your arms. Then your long trail shall end."

These were passionate words for Sutter to listen to.

There was a latent threat in Lola's last words.

If he should not promise to make her his wife, Zoe would not be restored.

"Lola, what makes you ask for such a reward?" he asked.

"My love!" was the quick exclamation. "The love of Lola knows no bounds. It stops at nothing. Senor, she loved you the first day she saw you, and thar was the day you came to her to ask her to hunt Zoe. Throw your money to the winds. Give Lola your love. She asks nothing more."

The girl stepped back.

It was Sutter's time to speak.

"She'll carry the pint," said Hercules Goldspur. "She struck him through his child. It's more than I kin stand. Thet she-panther sha'n't win in this game!"

The Idaho giant started up and was about to spring forward when Sutter answered Lola:

"Show me Zoe first," he said. "My child! then my answer."

There was cunning in the rancher's reply. Lola drew back with a laugh.

"I have played for substance, not shadows, senor," she said, like a person who is in a position to make demands. "Ke-p your love if it cannot be mine. If Zoe is not worth it, hunt on, but not with Lola for your sleuth-hound."

The eyes of the Mexican tigress flashed.

"Take back your wealth. I will bluff men with my own winnings!" she went on, and a little leather purse fell at Sutter's feet. "On the gold coast I will find a lover who has a heart. Senor, find your child; but not with Lola's help. Zoe may now be lost forever!"

She seemed about to leave Sutter alone, for she quickly lengthened the space between them by several yards.

A wild cry scarcely more than half human in intonation rose from the rancher's lips.

"My love for my child? Devil! Is it for this that I threw wealth into your lap and put you on the trail? You have Zoe in your hands. Ferdinand Sutter take a Mexican adder to his Arizona home? Not for a thousand loves like yours! Go! I will find her without you. And by the fadeless heavens! if you cross me I'll blight your life and plans at the same blow!"

A clear derisive laugh rolled over Lola's lips.

"Find her without Lola if you can!" she cried. "You have flung back her love. Senor, when your child falls into your arms she may be dead!"

The last word still sounded when the flashing-eyed beauty turned on her heel.

"I'll appear on ther stage now," said Hercules Goldspur, and a minute afterward the man who alighted between Sutter and the Poker Queen seemed to have dropped from the skies.

"Holy Dios!" cried Lola. "He has escaped from the Black Bonanza!"

"Thet's a solid fact, my she wild-cat," answered Hercules whirling upon Lola. "Hold on! I owe you one for cuttin' the rope arter Crimson Con with his slit wind-pipe got to ther top. Yer throat 'll just fit Goldspur's hand. I'll hold ye up an' laugh at ther game thet wouldn't win!"

He came toward her with eyes that laughed devilishly while he spoke, but the hand that darted like a rattlesnake at her yellowish throat missed its mark, for with a bound Lola sprang back, and was gone.

"Slipped through Goldspur's fingers, eh? But he'll get her yet!" the giant grated.

"You will talk with me first, sir."

Hercules Goldspur turned. The Arizonian faced him.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

BOWIE AND BOWIE.

THERE was fire in the rancher's eyes.

If Lola who had fled the scene had retraced her steps and looked back she would have smiled, and her eyes would have glittered like a serpent's at the scene in the little camp.

Hercules Goldspur, giant that he was, towered a head above the Arizonian.

"With you first—certainly," said Hercules, a smile playing with his finely-chiseled lips. "You know me. That Mexican cat gave me away. I am Hercules Goldspur."

"The man who has kept Zoe from me all these years. I ought to know you, Hercules Goldspur; yes, sir. Sometimes called The Man of the Velvet Hand, I believe."

As he finished the last sentence Sutter glanced at Goldspur's hands as if he had heard of them, and their deeds.

"Thet's my name in some sections," was the answer, and then the giant continued quickly:

"You an' Lola couldn't treat, eh? She played a bold hand, but you bluffed her with a no. Wal, ef she hedn't slipped through my fingers, we'd play a game thet 'd make her dance."

All this time the rancher was eying Goldspur with a deep-seated hatred.

Suddenly he broke forth again.

"She knows where my child is. Do you?"

"Not exactly, but I kin find her."

"And you will lengthen the distance between me and Zoe?"

"I don't know about that."

"I dare not trust you. What you have done might be repeated if you had an opportunity."

"Thet's so," smiled the giant.

"Mebbe you'd better not trust Hercules Goldspur."

"But I want my child. My God! you don't know how eager I am to embrace her once more. Then I would be willing to die."

Goldspur started forward.

"Wal, I'll bring her to you!" he exclaimed.

Sutter did not move.

"I mean it, Ferd Sutter," he went on. "It's Hercules Goldspur who talks."

"But your terms? One man came to me and wanted to sell me my own child for two hundred thousand dollars; then came Lola, the woman I hired to hunt Zoe down, and wanted my love in exchange for my own flesh and blood. Now what are your terms?"

"Happiness all around!" was the answer.

"The flappy Rattler didn't get his pile an' Lola left with what she came after. I'll get Zoe an run my chances."

"You will?"

"I will. I'm a mountain devil big ez a grizzly an' wild ez a wolf. I've bunted Injuns an' white liars half ov my life. Ef this hand ov mine hez choked men they all deserved ter be cooked. Never, sir, hez Goldspur shut off the wind ov any human bein' thet hed a right ter it. When you see Zoe ask her what I have done, an' stan' by her answer. I have said thet you shouldn't hev yer child till Hercules Goldspur said fer ye ter hev her, an' the terms Lola wanted ter make an' yer anxiety make me say: Now you shall have yer child!"

There was a terrible earnestness in the look and tones of the mountain Hercules.

"Find Zoe for me and name your reward," said Sutter. "My friend will help you in the hunt."

"What friend?"

"Ah! don't you know? He is called Cold-Deck Carl."

"What is he?"

"A short distance from camp."

Goldspur's eyes twinkled.

"Ther onery skunk got away, an' ther arter I choked 'im an' dropped him over the trail!" he murmured.

"He is here now," suddenly said Sutter. "Here comes Cold-Deck Carl."

Goldspur caught the Arizonian's look, and whirled to meet the man advancing upon the camp.

For a moment a slight curve in the trail hid his figure from view, and then he saw the stalwart form of his handsome dark-faced rival.

In another instant their eyes met, and Hercules Goldspur drew his figure up as if preparing for a grapple with Cold-Deck Carl.

Miraculous, indeed, must have been the gambler-sport's escape; but the present was no time to ask about it.

A conflict was at hand, for, for the two men to meet was to fight.

"Thet's him," said Goldspur, in tones heard only by the man at his side. "Ef thar's a meaner man in Idaho than Cold-Deck his name isn't on ther devil's directory. Know 'im? Why, ov course! My hand war at his windpipe once, an' he knows it."

Meanwhile, Cold Deck Carl was coming on, his dark face darker than ever, and his eyes fastened on the only man he seemed to see—The Man of the Velvet Hand.

Not a hand moved toward a weapon, as though the two men were going to measure arms and strength like two gladiators.

Cold Deck Carl did not stop until but five feet separated him from Hercules.

"I'm back," he said in low, mad tones. "Back from the clutches ov ther reds, an' from ther bottom ov ther cliff! I stand afore ther boss coward an' ther biggest in Idaho. Hercules Goldspur, I am Cold Deck Carl, ther Bowie-knife ov Monterey an' Pistol Gulch."

"At yer service!" exclaimed Goldspur. "I needn't announce myself; you know me."

"An' because I do know you, I am hyer."

"Wal?"

The giant's coolness gritted Carl's teeth.

"How shall we fight?" he flashed.

"Ob, that is it, eh? A fight? Wal, I'm an accommodatin' daisy. Our hands ar' about equal, I guess; but what's the pot?"

"That man's child," said Carl, with a glance at Sutter. "I am his friend—his pard. I have sworn to restore his daughter."

"So hev I," laughed Goldspur.

"It's an oath both ov us can't keep."

"Thet's impossible, Cold-Deck."

"Then, let the one who survives keep it."

"Thet suits me. Warn't you in Chihuahua seven years ago when yer dead pard, the colonel, fought Lopez, ther Mexican Monte King?"

"I saw thet fight."

"I thought so."

"Wal, what ov it?"

"I always liked thet way of fightin'."

"It's close range."

"So much the better."

"An' you want to fight me thet way?"

"Ef you will."

"I am ready!"

A moment later the right hand of each man gripped a ten-inch bowie.

"This is ther plan," said Goldspur, turning to Sutter, who had not said a word since the meeting of the two men. "We stand back to back, our loose hands lashed together at the wrist. At a signal, which you shall give, we wheel an' go to work with our bowies. It's very simple, sir. Ther best man wins, an' any way it goes, you git Zoe in ther end. This is ther way ther colonel fought Monte Lopez, ez we used ter call him. I saw thet fight."

"You?" ejaculated Cold-Deck, surprised.

"Yes. From ther back ov my boss on a trail above yer camp, I witnessed ther bull tussle. It war soon over. Lopez got it in his heart ther first blow. Hyer is my left hand."

Hercules Goldspur extended his hand as he finished.

In it lay a stout cord, several feet in length, which he had taken from his pocket.

"An' hyer's a hand that never touched a feller human's throat," said the gambler-sport sarcastically, as he held out a bronze hand to be lashed to that of his adversary.

The Arizonian looked at the two men with a remonstrance in his eyes, but one glance told him that the office of the peacemaker was one not required at that particular time and place.

The Northwest rivals stood face to face, ready to fight.

Without a word, Sutter bound the left hands together in a manner that allowed the two men to stand back to back.

"What was the signal in Chihuahua?" he asked, when he had completed the binding and had also stepped back.

"Ther howl ov a wolf up among the mountains, but thar's no wolf hyer ter signal fer us," said the gambler-sport. "Count five fer Hercules an' me. At ther last number we'll wheel an' hunt each others' hearts."

"In the first place I want a solemn oath that the survivor will stand by me until I have found Zoe," answered the Arizonian.

Instantly up went two knife-armed hands.

"I swear!" cried both men simultaneously. "I swear if I live over this fight to restore Zoe to her father's arms."

A gleam of satisfaction lighted up Sutter's countenance.

"I am satisfied. Now I begin to count."

"Drive ahead," said Hercules Goldspur with increasing impatience.

The following moment the rancher began to count in a clear firm voice.

At the fourth numeral two hands moved from their owners' sides.

At the fifth the rivals whirled and as the glittering bowie blades shot aloft, Sutter exclaimed:

"Fight! May the best man win!"

At the same moment he stepped still further back.

"This is for Zoe!" grated Cold-Deck Carl catching the giant's eye.

The reply was a malicious twinkle, and then the arm of the mountain Hercules dashed the sport's bowie down as he laughed:

"You'll be the Lopez ov this fight, Cold-Deck Carl!"

Ferdinand Sutter saw the rapid pass made by the gambler sport in reply to Goldspur's boast: he saw it met and in the twinkling of an eye rendered ineffective.

Then the blade held by Hercules flashed for a second in the beams of the ascending sun, and the man who dropped his bowie and staggered back, fell to the ground.

To the ground we say for a rapid cut by Hercules Goldspur severed the cords at the men's wrists, and The Man of the Velvet Hand stood erect victorious.

"I will keep my vow!" he said to the Arizonian. "Cure thet traitor ef ye kin, Arizony, but my opinion is thet he's beyond help. I hit him exactly whar ther colonel hit the Monte King in Chihuahua. When we meet ag'in, you shall take Zoe in yer arms."

"Thank God!" cried Sutter.

CHAPTER XXIX.

TRICKED AND TRAPPED.

A SKULKING figure with a lasso in a red right hand, and a pair of eyes that possess the glitter of a creeping jungle tiger's.

The sun has just set behind a bank of heavy clouds that line the western horizon, and the landscape that surrounds the creeper is rough and wildly picturesque.

The red-skin whose motions are those of the gliding panther holds the lasso ready for a cast.

Suddenly he stops and bugs the trail as though he was on the point of being discovered, but a moment later he is moving on again.

Look ahead of him and you will see a young girl leading a horse down the mountain path.

Her figure is somewhat slight but faultless, her skin is too dark for the skin of an American, and her eyes are as black as jet.

"Lola!" says the reader.

Yes, it is Lola, the Poker Queen of Idaho, and the red-skin on her trail with a lasso dangling from his hand is Red Fox, Goldspur's scarlet pard.

The girl has thrown her love at the Arizonian's feet to be rejected, as we have seen; she has offered to return Zoe in exchange for her affection, but he has answered her in a manner that made her black eyes flash, and once more she is alone among the mountains, still victor if she did not win the bold game she has played for Sutter's gold.

She walks ahead of her horse with the bridle held lightly in her hand, for the trail is rough, and the ragged rocks that jut out from the wall here and there would rudely brush one from the saddle.

Therefore, it was safer for Lola to walk and lead her horse.

But the tracker with the lasso?—what of him? Baffle an Indian trailer if you can.

Red Fox is watching his opportunity. Now the horse's head is in his way, now a rock.

Twice he has stopped to cast the lasso, but each time something has intervened and Lola has been saved.

A brilliant moon is overhead, and it shows the skulking Sioux the figure he has followed a long distance.

To lose her now would be to go back to Goldspur, his new pard, with empty hands.

But he would not lose Lola.

Red Fox the Sioux would not miss his mark. As Lola turned an abrupt bend in the trail the Sioux darted forward.

At the turn he halted and saw his prey only a short distance ahead, within the cast of his lasso.

"Red Fox has caught the Mexican serpent at last," he muttered. "His lasso, like his arrow never misses!"

All at once the coil left his red hand and shot down the trail at the red-skin's quarry.

It grazed the horse's neck and hovered for a second over the head of Lola, then dropping over her shoulders in a flash pinioned her arms to her sides!

It was a dexterous cast and as the lasso tightened, the insuared girl sprung back with a cry and whirled upon the grinning Indian at the other end.

"Lola is caught!" exclaimed Red Fox. "The lasso never fails when it shoots from the Sioux's hands."

"Dios! it is a red-skin."

There was a revolver in the belt that encircled the Poker Queen's waist, but her hands could not draw it for the encircling cord.

"Mexican Queen on her way to white girl, eh? Red Fox will go with her."

"You go with me to whom?" demanded Lola, feigning an astonishment which for a moment nonplused the Indian. "Things have reached a pretty pass when a woman can't travel without being lassoed by an Indian. *Sacrista!* loosen your cord, dog!"

"Not till Red Fox knows where the lost rose is," was the reply. "The black eyes of the Mexican can grow bright; but they shall not frighten the Sioux. Show him the trail to white girl."

"I will—when the stars fall! I'm no fool, Indian. Lola hasn't been rebuked by the Arizonian to be trumped by the card you play."

Red Fox now came down the rope with his eyes riveted upon the Poker Queen.

"She must tell Red Fox," he said to himself. "He shall find the white girl through the yellow snake he has caught in the mountain."

Lola returned his look with interest.

"Tell Red Fox!" he said, halting almost within arm's reach of the pinioned girl. "Lola must speak the truth, or—"

"Or what, demon?" was the sudden interruption. "If I lie what will you do?"

"Lola see," was the significant rejoinder.

"Well, then, I will not lie; but if you want Zoe, go and find her."

"Is this Lola's answer?"

"It is my only one. I tell no secrets to Indians."

Red Fox straightened up, his eyes resembling balls of fire and his left hand clinched.

"No tell, eh?"

"No!"

"Lola never see her prisoner ag'in!"

He flew at the Poker Queen before she could speak the defiant words that came to her tongue, and his strength bore her to the edge of the trail.

"What are you going to do, devil?" cried Lola.

There was no reply, but the Sioux forced Lola's foot from the path and she seemed to hang over a dark, unfathomable abyss.

"Hold!" she cried. "Holy Dios! I will show you Zoe!"

The Indian drew back, and his orbs lighted up with triumph.

"Mexican snake no lie, eh?" he asked, doubtfully.

"Why should I?" said Lola. "Who wants to be dashed to death on rocks one cannot see? Yes, I will show you the nest I robbed last. If you think I lie, throw me down yonder."

"No. Red Fox will trust Lola; but he will take her claws from her."

Lola's revolver and knife were quickly conveyed to the Sioux's belt, but the lasso was not loosened.

"Show Red Fox where the white girl is, and the Sioux will give Lola her freedom."

"I'll show you."

The pair drew back from the brink of the trail, and Lola started forward with an eagerness which the Indian did not think suspicious.

He never ceased to watch her for his hands were ready at the first sign of treachery to hurl her to death on the rocks which he knew lay a hundred feet beneath them.

"Yes I'll show him the nest from which I took the bird," said Lola to herself. "I will take the Indian to the place, and he will find it occupied, too. Senor Sutter laughed at the proffer of Lola's love, but he shall weep before long. The vengeance of Lola the Poker Queen shall haunt him the rest of his life. He shall go back to his ranch without his child in his arms unless he carries thither the corpse of Zoe, the lost."

She led the wary Sioux mile after mile up and down the mountain trails until the Indian lost patience and began to give her fierce looks and many of them.

"We are near the place," suddenly resumed Lola to herself. "I am going to pay the red-skin back for throwing this rope over my head. Red fool! I have played games before where my life was a stake."

When the girl halted at last and turned upon the Indian there was a gleam of revenge in her brilliant eyes.

"Now Red Fox shall see that Lola can keep her word," she said, lowering her voice. "We are near the white girl. Look, Indian! I have brought her back to the same nest I robbed."

She nodded toward a creper-covered wall at

her left as she spoke, and Red Fox's first look drew an exclamation of surprise from him.

"It is the cave to which Red Fox tracked the Rattler four weeks ago," he exclaimed.

"Yes, I came here and took Zoe from the man from Silver Bow; but when he went off on a trail from which he will never return I brought the white girl back, and she promised to stay here when I am away."

Without replying Red Fox raised the network of vines and saw the mouth of the cavern which he and Hercules Goldspur had invaded to find Zoe gone.

"If Lola has not lied she is free," he said.

"Try me. Go in and find the white girl."

The Sioux dropped the lasso and sprung into the opening.

Some distance ahead like a star glimmering in darkness he caught the flash of a fire.

"The Mexican serpent did not lie to Red Fox," he said. "He has found the white girl for the big pale pard."

He did not stop a moment to watch the movements of his lassoed captive; but, eager to secure the prize hunted so long, bounded down the darkened corridor.

All at once he landed in the cave proper, and halted in the light of the fire, his fine figure fully revealed and his giant shadow painted *en silhouette* on the wall.

"White girl, Red Fox is here to take you to Hercules!"

The next instant there came a tigerish voice from beyond the fire line.

"Red Fox, eh? My beau ideal, ye'r' ther very chick I've been prayin' fer! Hyer's my compliments—the kind that kill!"

The red trailer heard these words spellbound in the middle of the cavern, and with the last one there rung out the stunning report of a revolver.

Instantly the red-skin sprung into the air and fell without a death-cry of any kind, at the edge of the fire.

"What possessed that red-skin ter come hyer?" ejaculated the man who came forward to investigate the sudden shot. "He said he had come ter take Zoe to Hercules, didn't he? Wal, ther gal isn't hyer, an' hain't been since I took up my abode in this underground hotel. Blessed ar' them what wait. Wal, I'm one ov 'em, fer I've waited hyer, an' ther Injun who seized me t'other night came hyer fer me ter finish him!"

Need we mention the speaker's name?

As he knelt over the body of the Sioux a triumphant laugh rippled over the lips of the person who had listened for the death-shot at the mouth of the cave.

"You lassoed Lola, Red Fox, and then trusted her—fool!" the laughter exclaimed. "I steered you into the clutches of the man who wanted your blood. Tricked and trapped! Senor Red Fox, I leave you with the man I have robbed of Zoe!"

Once more the Mexican pantheress laughed, so loud this time that the Happy Rattler heard and sprung up.

"This Injun didn't come hyer alone," he exclaimed, clutching his revolver more firmly as he moved toward the corridor. "His pard's down ther waitin' fer a dose like ther one I've just administered."

He glided down the narrow passage to the end, but found no one there.

On the ground lay a lasso, and in the circle it formed he saw the imprint of two feet.

"Great Jehosaphat! Lola piloted the red-skin to me!" he cried.

Yes, the Poker Queen had brought him vengeance, and at that moment she was flying up the trail, triumphant.

He did not attempt to pursue, but after awhile went back into the cavern to find the donkey his companion through thick and thin gazing at the body in the firelight.

"Helped ter satisfaction by an enemy, George," the Happy Rattler exclaimed. "This is one ov them things I can't explain."

If he had followed Lola she would have led him a long chase to a cavern similar in structure to the one he occupied, and at her call in the gloom he would have heard a voice that might have startled him.

"Back, Lola!" said the beautiful young girl who sprung to the Poker Queen's side. "You have found my father, and—"

"I found him, but he wouldn't take you on my terms. But I am going to give you back to him anyhow."

"Thank Heaven, Lola!"

"Yes, you are going back to him at last, but dead!"

CHAPTER XXX.

A BREAK FOR LIBERTY.

ZOE staggered with a cry from the Poker Queen's side.

"Yes, dead," repeated Lola, following her up. "He wouldn't accept my terms, and so I left him. When he sees you, Zoe, he'll wish he had listened to me."

Back to the wall of the cavern shrunk the Arizonian's daughter, and the sallow but beau-

tiful tigress who stood before her showed her a pair of hands that seemed ready to tear her to pieces.

"Ah!" suddenly cried Zoe. "I know you now. You have been playing with me. You made my father an offer you knew he would never accept."

"No. I thought he would accept it. Zoe, can't you guess what it was?"

"No."

"Give me your love," I said to him, "and I will restore your child." That was my proposition. And Lola laughed.

"And he repulsed you?"

"Repulsed me insulted!"

"Good! I am glad he did it. You become my father's wife and my mother? I could never endure this torture, now that your actions have unmasked you. If my father is the man men say he is it is a wonder he did not strike you down."

"Which means that I should have been so served, eh, my bird?"

Zoe did not answer, but her look was reply enough for Lola.

She saw defiance and intense hatred in the eyes of her beautiful captive.

"I'd like to tear you up and then call your father here to see my work," hissed the Poker Queen. "Oh, I'm going to get even with him. He does not think, I hope, that his huntress is afraid to turn on her employer. I'm Lola—a woman—a tigress—not a child!"

As if urged by a sudden impulse the yellow beauty turned suddenly from Zoe and walked away.

"I'll have to be careful how I handle that girl," she said to herself. "She's got Ferdinand Sutter's blood in her veins. I am going to win yet. I will strike him a stunning blow through his own child. Ah! you have not seen the last of Lola, Senor Sutter. *Madre Dios!* but I will get even!"

Zoe, who was covertly watching her fair captor, saw her move to the opening of the cavern and disappear.

"Can I not escape?" she exclaimed. "I am not safe a moment in the hands of that woman. Can it be that she wanted to trade me for my father's love? Hercules, where are you? Strike my trail. Find me and take me to the parent who has hunted me so long."

Suddenly Lola reappeared to the young girl.

She came toward her with a look that spoke volumes, and before she spoke Zoe knew that she had made a discovery.

"Not a word, on your life," she said, grasping Zoe's wrist. "I tell you, my bird, that there's a man near, but he shall never enter our mountain home alive. Utter a cry and I'll give you this!" And she tapped the hilt of a bowie that protruded above her belt.

A man in the mountains?

Then that man was the captive's friend.

Zoe felt like uttering a cry of joy, and but for Lola's threat and the depths of the cave, she would have betrayed her position to the mountain prowler.

Who was that man?—her father?

"It may be Hercules," she said to herself.

"If it is he, I will not stay here long."

Lola seemed to read the prisoner's thoughts, for she quickly exclaimed:

"Don't think that he's going to find you! I have tricked him once and I am able to do it again. Some men fear him, but I do not. Now, my little bird, with your wings clipped, go back to your bed and forget that you have a friend among the mountains. Ah! can't do that, eh? Well, dream about him, then. What does Lola care?"

The Poker Queen released Zoe as she finished, and again went toward the opening of the cavern.

A desire to break the bars of her cage and seek freedom grew in Zoe's bosom.

She retreated to the shadows of the cavern, but did not seek the cot Lola's hands had prepared for her.

"Heaven help me! I will get free or die!" she suddenly exclaimed. "I don't want the life of the woman who holds me prisoner. I don't want a drop of anybody's blood; but freedom I will obtain!"

Armed only with determination, which was indeed a pillar of strength, the rancher's daughter turned toward the entrance to the cave.

Lola was not to be seen, but Zoe could picture her out among the trails watching the man whose presence threatened to deprive her of her captive.

"Once beyond this retreat, I can defy her," she murmured. "Fortune will guide me to the man who has come for me. It is Goldspur. I will believe it. His velvet hands will never choke me!"

Nearer and nearer she approached to the opening.

Lola did not stand in her way and while her heart seemed in her throat her hopes revived as she advanced.

At last Zoe saw the glimmer of a star, then another and another.

She was within a few feet of the opening.

All at once she paused and hugged the wall of

the short corridor that intervened between the trail and the cavern proper.

The crisis had come.

The next two minutes would determine her fate, and it was for breath that the Arizonian's child stopped near the opening.

Where was Lola?

With this mental question incessantly repeated the girl went forward again, this time to the opening.

She put her foot upon the trail and then sprung out altogether!

No Lola yet!

"Free! free!" cried the overjoyed girl, as she halted for a moment before the cavern. "Thank God! I have escaped from the power of Lola the Mexican."

Then she started off, down the trail, but whither she did not know.

Safety seemed to lie in every direction; she had but to run at the top of her speed awhile to insure her deliverance.

"Halt there!" suddenly rung out a voice before Zoe had cleared twenty feet. "Halt! or Lola will send you dead to your father."

But Zoe did not stop.

The thought of the person behind her lent her speed and with an ejaculation of defiance she increased her gait until she seemed to fly over the moonlit trail.

She knew that Lola was on her track; she felt that her foot-tracks were already being filled by the feet of Lola the Poker Queen.

A moment after the disobeyed command to halt Zoe heard at the same time it seemed the crack of a pistol and the ping of a bullet.

"You'll have to do better than that to carry out your threat!" she sent back with a laugh to her relentless pursuer. "My yellow tigress, the bird has escaped from her cage. You left the door open."

Zoe trusted to fate to lead her aright, and aright meant escape from Lola.

"I will have her back! *Santissima!* I will not let her go back to Senor Sutter before I have dealt with him again. Did I miss her? Ah! I will catch her with these hands of mine!"

Exclaiming thus, Lola flew after the rancher's child her hands eager to close on her once more.

Zoe heard the last words; they told her that unless something soon occurred in her favor she would fall back into the clutches of the Poker Queen.

All of a sudden Zoe halted and attempted to start back with a wild cry.

There was a sudden turn in the narrow brush-fringed trail she had been treading—an angle so acute that she had not seen it.

"My God!" fell from her lips as she felt the very earth beneath her feet giving way. "Merciful heaven! rescue me from the foe behind and rocks beneath!"

She fell down, drawn to the trail by the loosening earth, and clutched wildly at the rocks that seemed to offer help.

She had advanced to the very brink of the precipice and her weight had broken it.

The keen eye of Lola saw Zoe's peril.

She uttered a cry of horror.

The prize through whom she expected to win the rancher was slipping through her grasp.

She threw herself forward to seize the young girl struggling to escape from the crumbling trail and her eager hands shot out to accomplish her mission. But ere they could touch Zoe, the trail itself with a dull noise that was horrible, disappeared, and Lola sprung back just in time to prevent going down with it!

It was a thrilling moment.

Zoe was not to be seen.

CHAPTER XXXI.

A COOL TRAILER.

A THRILLING cry rung from Lola's throat as the trail, carrying with it Zoe, disappeared from sight.

For several moments she clung to the bushes that had kept her from following the young girl, then she crept to the edge of the broken mountain path and ventured to look over.

She stood on the edge of a abyss that made her shudder.

Far below lay the debris of the trail, but her eyes could not detect a sign of Zoe.

"Is she lost to me?" she exclaimed. "Can it be Zoe has been snatched from me by an accident thus baffling me at last? I will not believe it, but better this than to see her fall back into the power of the man prowling tiger-like among these mountains. I will recover Zoe, dead or alive."

She started back and ran up the trail some distance, for she could not leap the chasm formed by the breaking of the trail.

When she paused it was to look down again, and then to swing herself over the edge of the mountain path to another, several feet below.

Intent upon finding Zoe, the Poker Queen was oblivious to everything else.

She thought only of the desperate game she was playing for the Arizonian's love.

After a while she found herself on a level with the debris, and hastened forward.

"Here's where the earth-fall struck," she said, halting on the spot. "Zoe! Zoe! are you here?"

There was no response to Lola's agonized call, and she fell to work to examine the crumbled ruins of the trail.

If Zoe was buried beneath them but little hope of her safety could be entertained, for the mass was enough to crush the life out of any one.

But Lola did not despair.

She scrambled hither and thither over the mass in her breathless search for Zoe, now and then uttering maledictions on the accident which had deprived her of a prisoner.

At last there came up from a crevice in the mass of earth and rocks a faint cry that carried Lola to the spot.

"Zoe, are you there?" she exclaimed, putting her face down to the place.

"I am here, but for Heaven's sake release me!"

The Poker Queen did not hesitate a moment, but fell eagerly to work with a strength she did not seem to possess.

"I will get you out of this, Zoe," she said. "My God! if you had but remained in the cave! But you wanted freedom, didn't you, my bird?"

There was no reply, and fearful that her late captive had fainted, Lola ceased, and worked on.

At length she could reach down into the gap and touch the girl buried alive.

Then she discovered that Zoe was wedged in between two rocks, and was in a precarious situation.

This only increased her desire to rescue the girl, an object which was not accomplished until at the end of two hours' labor.

She drew Zoe out from among the ruins of the trail, and stared at the bloodless face presented to her gaze.

"Saved! but nearly dead, I'm afraid," she exclaimed. "Ah! that cursed trail! It broke a moment too soon for Lola!"

Zoe had fainted in the arms of the Poker Queen, and as Lola carried her from the spot she looked like a person who had played her last part in the mountain drama.

With her prize again secured, Lola started back toward the cave-prison.

Every now and then she gazed anxiously into Zoe's face, still expressionless and white.

"This is your fault, Ferd Sutter!" she suddenly exclaimed. "You rejected Lola's love and brought your child to this. And you, Hercules Goldspur—you have lost your pretty pard forever."

Just then the Mexican girl stopped suddenly, and the next moment recoiled with an exclamation of surprise.

There stood before her in the silvery moonlight a veritable giant, whose eyes fairly glowed under the brim of his sombrero.

"The devil himself—Hercules Goldspur!" fell from Lola's lips.

A laugh from the lips of the giant was the first response.

"I turn up generally whar I'm not wanted," said Goldspur, looking more at Zoe than at her captor. "I see that you hev Zoe thar. What's ther matter with my daisy pard?"

"She's dead," said Lola in tones that startled the giant.

"Dead? Zoe dead? That's a lie, Lola," he flashed.

"May be it is," said Lola, showing her teeth in a grin. "If she isn't dead, she may be before morning. Stand back!" as Goldspur's eagerness to take Zoe threw him forward. "You don't touch Zoe without my consent!"

The Idaho giant looked amazed.

"Don't, eh? Beware! I have a hand for your neck, Lola!"

"And I have something just as deadly for this girl. B hold it, Hercules Goldspur," and The Man of the Velvet Hand saw the knife which Lola had drawn from her belt and now held above Zoe's bosom.

"You don't touch Zoe without my consent," she went on, eying Goldspur fiercely. "I have saved her life to-night, and she belongs to me."

"You can't accomplish your purpose a'ainst Sutter through her," was the answer. "That's played out. Now that ther Arizonian knows what ye'r after, he'll be on his guard. You may stand thar an' hold thet knife over Zoe, but it'll do you no good. You may even send it home, but thet will only end your game."

"Well, it would bluff others," snapped Lola, madly. "Senor Sutter understands me. He knows that unless he promises to make Lola his wife he will never take his child alive to his breast. I gave him so understand that when I left him. Lola will keep her word. She will not hesitate to send her knife to the heart of the senor's child."

"You ar' a she-devil," grated Hercules. "I want that girl as badly ez Ferd Sutter does."

"To give her back to him?"

"Sartainly."

"Then you and Cold-Deck Carl will fight for her."

"I reckon not," laughed Hercules.

"Why not? He wants her."

"He did, but he doesn't now."

Lola's look was an interrogation.

"Cold-Deck an' I hev hed it out," said Hercules. "He came up in Sutter's camp, an' ov

course we went at it. I left 'im ther', cut pretty deep, an' beyond ther help ov doctors. We fought ther way they used ter fight in Chihuahua, hand tied ter hand, and, until ther signal, back ter back. No, Lola, Cold-Deck an' I will never fight fer Zoe."

The giant's revelation was news to the Mexican, and her look plainly showed it.

"Can't hev Zoe, eh?" he suddenly asked.

"I have said so."

Lola's voice was full of stern determination.

"Then I'll hev you—thet'll set things about even."

"Me?"

"Nobody else. Take Zoe out of my sight, then. You have said she is dead, but she isn't. I kin see thet now, even by the light ov ther moon. Yes, I'll hev you. You needn't ask me what I mean, fer I see by yer eyes thet ye know. When I hunt a grizzly I always git thar, Lola, an' ye'r the b'ar this time. Go!"

Goldspur stepped back as he finished, and made a sign for Lola to depart.

The giant's last look was at the Mexican's beautiful burden, and it was with difficulty that he kept his hand from his revolver as his eyes shot a mad, fierce glance at the Poker Queen.

"Halt!" suddenly cried Lola, but the only answer was the glance Hercules Goldspur sent over his shoulder.

"Halt! What fer?" he exclaimed. "We can't trade to-night. You say I shall never touch Zoe ag'in, an' I say I shall—thet's ther bull upshot ov ther matter. We can't trade, Lola, so what's ther use ov stopping hyer. Go yer way. I'll git thar about ez soon ez you do."

He started off again, when with a wild cry the Poker Queen sprang after him.

"Sacerista! you shall listen to me!" she exclaimed.

"I guess not," laughed the Idaho giant.

"You shall! I hold my knife over Zoe's heart. See! it almost touches her skin. I will drive it home if you do not listen to me."

"You kill thet girl? I'm not afraid ov thet, so long ez I don't jump forward ter take her. You want ter give Ferd Sutter another chance ter win a gentle wife like Lola ther Poker Queen. Oh, no; you ar' not goin' ter hunt Zoe, my Mexican viper. Don't stop me any more, please."

A hiss indicative of intense disappointment parted Lola's lips.

She stopped in the middle of the trail, and stared aghast at the man who, thus situated, could talk so coolly.

"I will kill her! This time Lola will not lie!" she almost shrieked.

"Kill her, then!"

With the last word which was a banter, Hercules Goldspur turned his back upon the girl and once more deliberately walked away.

Zoe's eyes flashed and her knife, firmly clutched in her right hand, shot upward.

There was murder, vengeance in the gleam.

The mountain Ajax did not seem to see her, for he was walking off with the tread of a man who had conquered, not of one who had just been baffled.

But the knife did not sink into Zoe's breast.

Slowly and bloodless it sunk to the Mexican's side, and she gazed strangely into the white face of the unconscious girl lying on her arm.

"He dares me, and I don't kill you," she said, addressing Zoe. "He says I will try Ferdinand Sutter again. I will give the American one more trial. I will say 'Love Lola and take back your child. Refuse her, and go home without her.' I do not fear this giant whose hand is like velvet. I hold the best hand because Zoe is the stake he and the American are playing. Lola, one of two things must occur within the next few hours. You become Senor Sutter's bride or Zoe gets your knife. He says I dare not strike. Ah! the mountain giant shall see!"

She stepped back and put up the knife to catch Zoe more firmly with the hand that had clutched it.

Then, with a parting glance in the direction taken by Hercules, she went back toward the broken trail as if afraid to follow in the footsteps of the Mountain Giant.

Far from the spot Zoe at last opened her eyes and looked into Lola's face.

The Poker Queen met the look with a glance of triumph.

"You are safe, Zoe," she said.

The rancher's daughter started at sound of the voice.

"Safe—in your arms?" she exclaimed.

"Why not? I am Lola."

"Lola, who hates my father?"

"No, who loves him; Lola who would give her right arm to become his wife. But, never mind—I will win him yet."

"And become my mother?"

"Yes, my bird."

"I pray Heaven that that day may never come!"

Lola laughed derisively.

"Let us wait," she said. "The hour is very near at hand. In all my life I have never lost a game, and I have played thousands."

"But you will lose this one."

"Do you really think so, Zoe? A few days ago I thought it was lost, but now I am sure of it," and the eyes of the Poker Queen fairly glittered while she laughed.

CHAPTER XXXII.

COLD DECK CARL TRICKS THE QUEEN.

ZOE'S attempted escape from the clutches of Lola the Poker Queen had resulted in failure, and nobody rejoiced over it more than the Mexican herself.

Several hours after her encounter with Hercules Goldspur, she was seen to emerge from a cavern in the mountain side and walk rapidly over a trail leading toward the level ground below.

"Once more I go to him," she said aloud to herself. "Once more I face you, Senor Sutter. For the last time Lola makes her demand."

Zoe was doubtless somewhere in the cavern, so situated that escape was impossible during her captor's absence, and the Mexican was confident once more that she would win the name and wealth of the Arizonian.

She seemed to know exactly where to find the camp, for not long after her departure from the cavern she came almost suddenly upon a small fire smoldering under the base of a bill, and in the dim light of it she saw a figure well muffled in a blanket.

"He is alone. Ah! I will disturb his dreams."

With her eyes fastened on the sleeper she crept forward with stealth and cunning, never for a moment looking back to see that Hercules Goldspur the man who had laughed at her threats was at her heels.

The sole occupant of the mountain camp was so muffled in the blanket that Lola could not see his face even when she stopped at his side and leaned over him.

At length her finger gently touched the man, and as the blanket fell back from his face she recoiled with an ejaculation of horror.

"Holy Dios!" rung from her throat, as she stared at the man. "He said he had killed you."

There was a hollow, but triumphant laugh.

"Wal, he lied; don't you think so, Lola?" followed the laugh. "Did you think you war wakin' my pard? Wal, won't I do just as well?"

Still excited by the man's face and voice, the Poker Queen could only stare and hold her breath.

She had roused the wrong man, for instead of disturbing Sutter the Arizonian, she had roused Cold Deck Carl.

"Said I war dead, did he?" the gambler-sport went on. "Told you, probably, that we fought like my old pard, ther colonel, fought the Mexican Monte King in Chihuahua years ago. Wal, that's just what we did, girl. Sutter tied our hands an' gave the signal. We got in a few bad blows at first; then all at once whiz down came his knife an' struck me hyer."

The man who was speaking opened his jacket and showed Lola a terrible gash in the cloth evidently made by a knife.

"Thet bowie made me expose my secret ter my pard," continued Cold Deck. "Talk about arms! He's got one thet kin almost drive a bowie through three inches ov steel. Wal, thet knife ov his'n struck right, but my protector turned it aside. However, ther force ov thet blow stunned me, an' when I got up ag'in, fer he cut us loose arter it an' I fell, he war gone. When he told you, Lola, thet he hed wiped Cold Deck Carl out, he lied without knowin' it, fer he left my pard believin' thet he hed trumped my l'st kerd with his ten-inch bowie. I'm worth fifty dead men. My protector ar' no slouch, girl. The colonel wore it when he killed the Monte King, an' before I buried him arter Sutter had wiped 'im out at You-Bet, I appropriated it ter my own use. Steel turns steel every time. Show me Hercules Goldspur! I'll rise before him like a ghost and show him thet ther seat ov life lies in Cold Deck Carl's brain, not on ther outside ov a steel vest."

The Poker Queen listened to the gambler-sport and did not speak when he had finished.

"Wal, you didn't make ther rifle with Sutter when you war hyer afore," he laughed. "Struck 'im too hard don't you think? Why didn't you bring in the girl, an' play yer hand arterward? He would hev taken you to ther ranch, an' thar you could have woven the cards about him. Wouldn't it hev been best? Lola, war I in yer shoes, I would hev played a different game."

The black eyes of the Poker Queen seemed to flash.

"Where is he?" she asked.

"Whar you can't reach him just now. Come, girl. Ther bluff game won't do. Try ther mild dodge once. Say to him thet you have become penitent, an' thet you will take him to his child. I'll stand in with you an' we'll share the spoils. What do you say, girl?"

Lola looked deep into Cold Deck Carl's eyes. Could she trust this slick, slippery devil?

"You want Ferd Sutter an' I want him to get his child," he said. "I'll divide with you. We'll both go to the ranch, an' ef you play a fair game with me fer yer pard, you'll be queen thar in less than six months—queen ov Ferd Sutter, an' ther boss ranch ov Arizona."

Cold-Deck Carl was playing a shrewd game. He wanted to know where Zoe was and he knew that Lola was the sole possessor of the secret.

"But he will not listen to me if I come to him and say that I will give Zoe up," she said.

"Then throw the girl into his arms an' say, 'Thar's yer child. Now has Lola lied?' Then step back and await results. Thet's policy, girl. You can't bluff Ferd Sutter. I know ther man."

"Senor, I will do it!" suddenly exclaimed Lola. "The girl is nearer than you think. I can have her here by daylight. Will he be back then?"

"Yes; but I will go with you. I will help you bring Zoe to her father. You forget that Hercules Goldspur may strike your trail. I give you my word, though, that I will let you do the giving back. It shall be your game. By restorin' his child, an' sayin' that you struck him too hard, is ther only way you kin win ther big ranch an' its owner's love—ef you ar' dyin' fer that."

"Are you ready to go now?" asked Lola.

"I am ready."

"Come, then, and Lola will show you the long lost Rose of Arizona."

Cold-Deck Carl could hardly contain his delight.

"Keep a strait-jacket on for a while, Carl," he murmured to himself. "You've struck a reg'lar bonanza by lettin' Lola wake ther wrong man. She give Zoe back at last an' rake in all ther credit? Wal, I guess not. Yes," to the eager girl, "I'm rather eager ter see Zoe, so let's be off."

But Cold-Deck Carl did not vacate the camp before he had deposited under a stone, where it was sure to be found, a bit of writing, which would inform the Arizonian that he, Carl, had gone away on the most important business, and would on his return bring him face to face with a person whom he wanted to meet.

Then, accompanied by Lola, the Mexican, he left camp, and the two hurried away over a mountain trail, the eagerness of one vying with that of the other.

Lola had not uttered a falsehood when she told Cold-Deck Carl that Zoe Sutter was nearer the camp than he thought.

The mountains of the great Northwest are honeycombed, as it were, with hiding-places, known only to the cunning fox or the Indian or white man who, by accident, discovers them.

Lola had found two or more in her efforts to conceal her beautiful captive from those who wanted her, and to the last one she conducted the eager, almost breathless gambler-sport.

Cold-Deck Carl's eyes blazed with good-fortune when Lola, pausing suddenly before the retreat, announced the end of the journey.

"Are we hyer at last?" he exclaimed.

"Whar's Zoe?"

"Cold-Deck shall see."

Several minutes later a young girl shrunk, with a light cry of terror, from the gambler-sport.

"Zoe, at last!" cried Carl. "Girl, the day of deliverance has come at last. Your father wants to see his stolen child. I am hyer ter take ye to him."

Still Zoe mistrusted the sport.

She had been told that she should ever look upon him as her enemy; but now he stood before her, offering to release her from Lola's power, and to restore her to the arms of the man she had not looked upon since she was a babe in the cradle.

What kind of a compromise had Lola and Cold-Deck effected?

They were together, and Zoe knew that the gambler-sport had sworn allegiance to Ferdinand Sutter, her father.

It was a problem too deep for the captive's mind, and rejecting it on these grounds, she went toward the sport.

"Take me to him," she said, with a glance at Lola. "For Heaven's sake, end forever the terrible drama of which I have been a part!"

"That's what I'm hyer for," was the answer; and the next moment Cold-Deck Carl held Zoe's hand.

A thrill seemed to shoot to the heart of the desperado, and it was with difficulty that he concealed his delight from the watchful Lola.

"Now!" he cried. "Back to the camp where the father waits for his child."

"Am I really to see him?" asked Zoe.

"Yes; and afore mornin', too."

Still holding Zoe's hand, Cold-Deck Carl started down the corridor leading to the mouth of the cavern, almost oblivious of Lola's presence.

When a hand fell softly upon his arm, he turned half-way round, and looked down into the passion-lighted eyes of the Mexican.

"Who is to give Zoe back to her father?" she asked.

"You ar'," said Carl, relinquishing the captive's hand. "Bless me, ef I didn't forget ye."

"Lola will give her back."

The Poker Queen now stepped quickly to Zoe's side, forcing Cold-Deck Carl to fall back, which he did in sullen mood, and with a dark scowl.

"Don't step on my toes, Lola," he growled. "I bite."

Once out of the cave, the three hurried along over the trail, which Zoe was hoping would lead her to her father by the dawn of another day.

Two miles from the place, Cold-Deck Carl carried himself by a single stride, to Lola's side.

It was the step of the panther, noiseless and catlike.

Suddenly his left hand fell upon the Mexican's shoulder.

"I'll take charge ov ther gal," he hissed, as Lola turned.

Lola attempted to free herself from the grip of the gambler-sport, but without avail.

He was upon her like a tiger.

"Didn't you hear me? I'll take charge of Zoe!" he said once more. "It's five hundred feet to ther next trail below this one. Down you go, my yaller hawk."

He forced the Mexican pantheress to the very edge of the trail, leaving Zoe white-faced and spellbound, several feet away.

"I'll keep all ther spoil this game fetches me. Not a dollar fer you, Lola—not another stake ter the Poker Queen ter rake in!"

The eyes of the doomed woman seemed to be suddenly transformed into living coals.

She clutched the arm that held her off, but it seemed a rod of iron which she could not move.

Nearer and nearer to the edge of the lotty trail with the victorious laugh of Cold-Deck Carl in her ears!

It was an awful moment.

All at once a wild piercing cry pealed from her throat.

The mountains took it up, and sent it back with a thousand weird echoes.

It startled a man in a little camp a mile away, and he listened for another but it was not repeated.

It also aroused another man who, unlike the first, did not wait for a repetition but tightened his belt and sprung away like a deer.

A thunderbolt would not have reached the spot in time to have prevented the tragedy that succeeded Lola's shriek.

Cold-Deck Carl shook her hands loose, and then, as he ground his teeth, he threw her from the trail with the madness of a demon!

"Go, Lola! Death teaches you never to play ag'in Cold Deck Carl."

Zoe saw her old enemy disappear over the cliff, and also saw the gambler-sport lean over it with a revolver in his hand.

"Curse her! She's caught in a tree! She hangs! By Heavens! she lives!" he cried.

Then Carl lowered his revolver and fired three times in rapid succession.

With the last shot he sprung up and came back to Zoe.

"Now fer yer father's arms!" he said. "You sha'n't stop this side ov'im, my daisy."

He caught Zoe's hand and hurried her from the spot.

Away went the pair down the moonlit trail, Cold Deck Carl laughing to himself over the victory he had just won.

All at once he burst like a thunderbolt into a little camp where a man stood erect before a fire.

The occupant of the camp sprang forward at the sight of the pair.

"Hyer she is!" cried Cold-Deck Carl. "Ferdinand Sutter, Cold-Deck brings yer child back to you."

Zoe saw the tall and handsome man approach her, and her heart leaped up into her throat.

"That my child!" she heard him say as his eyes became fixed upon her. "Have I hunted all these years for this? Cold-Deck Carl that girl is not Sutter's child."

Poor Zoe!

She saw Cold-Deck Carl start back, and heard his mad oath.

Then she fell senseless at Sutter's feet.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

HAND AND THROAT.

THE gambler-sport soon recovered from his astonishment.

"Don't go back on her now!" he exclaimed to Sutter, as he pointed at the young girl lying senseless at his feet. "She's your child—I'll swar to it; an' oughtn't I ter know, seein' that I used ter be ther colonel's pard?"

"Yes, but—"

"Sae's yours I say! Go back on thet girl, an' you turn yer back on yer own flesh an' blood! Ef you don't want'er, however, she'll find an everlasting friend in Cold-Deck Carl."

The last sentence carried the Arizonian to Zoe's side.

Stooping suddenly, he lifted her in his arms, and held her up that he might study her face.

"I see now!" he suddenly cried. "She does resemble my wife. It is true, thank God! that I hold Zoe in my arms once more!"

The eyes of the gambler-sport flashed with triumph.

Sutter stood before him kissing the white face of the girl he held in his arms, and utterly oblivious to his surroundings.

"And you brought her back!" he cried, looking up suddenly and then advancing toward Cold-Deck. "The Mexican tigress did not get to carry out her threat. All the love I am capable of bestowing on any one I give to this fair creature—my child! What! me love that yellow traitress? Never! A thousand thanks to you, Cold-Deck! In the future receive the reward due you for your services. Ferdinand Sutter cannot pay you now."

"Never mind the pay, pard," said the gambler-sport. "I am satisfied with seein' Zoe in your arms; I ask no more. Excuse me fer a little while; you an' yer child want ter be alone."

Cold-Deck Carl withdrew from the scene and left the camp.

The Arizonian, who had not recognized his daughter at first sight, was now overjoyed to know that he actually held her in his arms, and that he could turn his face toward the old ranch from which she had been stolen years ago.

Cold-Deck Carl walked away with the tread of a conqueror.

"She's mine, an' all thet follers ther conquest!" he exclaimed. "I hold ther winnin' card, an' nobody kin eucher me. It's been a long, shrewd game, but I've got thar in spite ov Pigmy Pete, ther Rattler, and Goldspur's velvet fingers. Let thet man cross my path ag'in ef he dares. He swore ter restore Zoe to her father's arms, but he hez failed. I am ther lucky man. Cold-Deck, you've struck a bonanza!"

He did not stop until he reached the spot from which he had hurled Lola, the Poker Queen, over the trail.

Leaning over the fringe of the mountain-path he looked anxiously below until his searching eyes caught sight of an object that made them glitter.

"She's thar yet in ther tree," he said. "I'm hyer ter see thet she's dead an' out ov my way forever. A feller doesn't want a tigress like Lola after him when he's movin' off with ther stakes ov his biggest game. You must be dead, Lola."

It seemed barely possible for a human being to clamber down in safety to the trees that grew out from the cliff-wall many feet underneath the trail, but Cold-Deck Carl had determined to risk it.

Morning had come, and he could see a certain object among the tree-tops.

He knew it was his victim at whom he had fired three rapid shots after his tigerish work, and then turned away to conduct Zoe to her father.

To go down to Lola and ascertain her exact condition—this was his resolve.

She might not be dead; she might be able to follow him and baffle him in the end, tigress that she was, with vengeful blood in her veins.

So he swung himself over the trail, and, hand over hand while he shut his teeth hard, went down the wall which was not perpendicular but slanted in a manner that rendered his descent all the more dangerous.

Any person watching the gambler-sport would have stared aghast at him.

"It's all fer Zoe an' ther biggest slice out ov the best ranch in Arizony!" he said to himself. "Ef I tumble, it's good-by Cold-Deck; but I'm not goin' ter lose my grip."

Down—down he went, now and then looking beneath him to note his progress and to see that he was nearing the goal for which he had started.

At last, with an ejaculation of satisfaction, Cold Deck Carl reached the tree-tops, and stopped on the outside to catch his breath.

He was within a few feet of the body lying among the limbs, and his first glance showed him a pallid face and a pair of eyes that stared at the blue sky far, far above.

"I'm rewarded fer comin' down hyer," he said. "Lola will never bluff another chap. Death hez trumped her last hand, an' she hez lost Sutter an' ther ranch forever!"

Having rested, he crept still further down to where the Poker Queen lay.

Her fall from the trail above had been a terrible one, but notwithstanding it there were evidences that it had not immediately killed her.

Death had tightened Lola's hands about a pair of limbs, and fixed her features.

Cold Deck Carl knelt over the body with intense satisfaction in his dark eyes.

It was his victory.

All at once he started and raised one of Lola's arms.

"Who's been hyer?" he exclaimed.

Then he tore from the dead girl's sleeve the bit of paper that had met his gaze and the next moment he read:

"This creature was a tigress, but a woman. I've got a hand fer the man who threw her down hyer."

"HERCULES GOLDSBUR."

"Ho! you've been hyer, hev you?" cried the sport looking up. "You've climbed down from above an' found Lola hyer? A tigress but a woman! I don't know about ther woman part, Hercules. An' you've got a hand fer me? Whar is it! Show thet hand ov yours. Oh,

I'm ready ter play any game you call fer. Giant thet ye ar', thar's one you can't bluff, an' men call him Cold-Deck Carl."

There was a good deal of braggadocio in Cold-Deck's tones; but his manner did not indicate cowardice, for of all things a coward he was not.

He tore the paper off and crunched it in his hand.

"The sooner the better!" he flashed. "Whar ar' ye, Hercules Goldspur? An' whar's thet famous hand ov yers? Good-by, Lola. We meet no more."

He drew back from the body lying in the tree-top, and glanced downward at the trail at the extreme foot of the mountain.

To climb up to the spot from whence he had started was impossible, and he began to descend still lower.

Half an hour later, after a perilous descent, he stood on the solid earth once more and looked up triumphantly at the difficulties he had mastered.

"Now fer whatever stands in my path!" he exclaimed. "I'm ready fer anything."

He moved off in a quick gait and with his face turned toward the south in which direction lay the camp where he had left Sutter and his newly found daughter.

Now he was going back in triumph.

Five minutes later a man stepped quietly into the very trail which Cold-Deck was treading and there came over the glistening barrel of a leveled rifle one stern word:

"Halt!"

Cold-Deck Carl had already stopped and while the word still sounded he whipped out a revolver.

"Hold up!" followed the command. "Disobey Hercules Goldspur, an' thet steel vest ov yers will not save ye this time. I've got a bead on yer face, Cold-Deck. Hands up!"

For a moment the gambler sport bit his lips and was inclined to disobey.

"Been back ter Lola, eh?" laughed Hercules. "Found her dead ov course, an' ther message I left bein'. Ye'r a bad one, Cold-Deck; but I'm worse. Up with yer hands!"

Suddenly but because he saw the gleaming eyes visible under the brim of the gold-laced sombrero Cold-Deck Carl put up his revolver and elevated his bronzed hands above his head.

Hercules Goldspur took six steps nearer.

"Thar shall be fair play between us," he said. "Cold-Deck, take yer bowie an' revolver an' throw 'em back over yer head."

"To put me completely at yer mercy?—to let you shoot a man who hez no weapon?" he growled.

"Hev'n't I said that we should fight fair?" was the answer. "This time a steel vest sha'n't balk me ner defend you. Fair play, Cold-Deck. This fight is fer Zoe."

The gambler-sport dropped one of his arms, and drawing knife and pistol sent them many feet behind him.

"Thet's fair," and Goldspur's rifle fell from his practiced eye.

Then he set it against the wall of the trail and in a moment divested himself of his side-arms which he cast beside the rifle.

The next moment with a laugh that lent a twinkle to his eyes he bounded down the trail like an eager wrestler stripped for the contest.

His movements were so quick that the gambler-sport had not time to recover his weapons before the Mountain Hercules was upon him.

"Fair play! hand ter hand!" exclaimed Goldspur. "Got on yer steel vest, Carl? It blunted my bowie the last time, but I thought I hed finished you. Lola told me all afore she died. I got ter ther Poker Queen just in time ter hear all."

"An' you swore—promised her—ter choke me with thet silken hand ov yers?"

"Mebbe I did, Carl!"

Cold-Deck Carl drew back an inch and there seemed to brace himself.

"I finished Lola. I gave Zoe back to her father. The girl has forgotten you."

"Thet's a lie!"

The harsh sentence seemed to throw a torch into Cold-Deck's eyes.

The next moment he sprang like a lion straight at Hercules, and aimed at his head a blow that would have felled an ox.

But quick as a flash the stroke was parried by an arm of steel, and the next instant the gambler sport went backward with a soft but terrible hand at his throat!

"When my hand forgets its cunning" Cold-Deck, Hercules Goldspur will be dead!" laughed the giant.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

COLD DECK'S BEST HAND.

THE strength and grip of The Man of the Velvet Hand were resistless.

Cold-Deck Carl fought against the choking fingers, but without avail.

They seemed to be behind his windpipe, tearing everything to pieces there; they were slowly but surely crushing out his very life.

It was the same hand that had lacerated Crimson Con's throat in the depths of the Black Bonanza shaft, and the one that had saved the

Northern Pacific train from pillage by the Seven Masks from You-Bet.

That hand had a name and a history, and its last exploit was about to add fame to both.

Backward reeled the gambler-sport under that terrible grip, and the possessor of the softest but deadliest hand in the Northwest followed him up, without for a moment relaxing his grip.

"It's fair play!" he hissed in the blackened face of the sport. "Mebbe I possess a little advantage by ownin' this fist, Cold-Deck, but you got in ther first blow, which didn't win."

All at once he stopped, as if a happy thought had struck him.

"I'll take him with me ter Zoe," he exclaimed. "She'll hev ter choose between us sometime, an' it might ez well be now."

Then his grip relaxed, and the man who for several minutes had been held by that vise of flesh and sinew, fell to the ground like one dead.

The velvet hand had conquered.

With a glance at his victim, Hercules Goldspur walked back, and picked up his gun and side-arms.

Then he returned to Cold-Deck Carl and leaning against a rock, waited calmly for his return to himself.

There was a quiet expression of victory visible on the giant's face, as with folded arms he watched the man lying in the life-giving beams of the morning sun.

Not until his rival moved did he start.

Then he sprang to Cold-Deck's side.

"We're goin' ter take a walk," he said. "Git up an' come with me."

After several trials Cold-Deck Carl got upon his feet and glared madly at the man who faced him.

"Come," said Hercules quietly. "We'll go an' let Zoe take her choice."

Then the gambler-sport seemed to comprehend his enemy's intention.

"Will you do thet?" he cried.

"I will."

"Then, I am ready!"

Hercules Goldspur received Carl's eagerness with a searching look.

"He's not afraid to let Zoe choose," he murmured. "What does this mean? Has Zoe gone back on Goldspur?"

Then he smiled at seeing Cold-Deck Carl put his hand up to his bruised throat.

"Thet's a devil's hand you hev," said the gambler-sport with a glance at the hand which had wrought so much mischief.

"Does it look like one?" and Hercules held out the member for Carl's inspection. "It's a daisy on ther grip—thet I'll acknowledge; but I own it, an' I'm no devil."

The gambler said no more, but looked anxiously down the trail.

"I'm ready now," said Hercules, noticing the glance. "This time Zoe plays the winnin' hand. But dare you swar ter abide by her decision?"

"I dare! dare you?"

"Yes."

"Hands up!"

The bronzed rivals raised their right hands, and Hercules Goldspur said:

"I swar ter abide by Zoe's decision between Cold-Deck Carl an' I. If she chooses him, I will turn my back upon the girl forever."

The gambler-sport heard his enemy through.

"An' Cold-Deck Carl swars ter play fair after Zoe's choice. If it falls on Hercules Goldspur, he will throw up his hand an' quit ther game forever."

The two men did not stand more than five feet apart, and the tableau they formed on the mountain trail was wild and picturesque.

The last sounds of Cold-Deck's oath died away as his unlifted hand dropped at his side, and with a proud look at Goldspur he exclaimed:

"To Zoe! I'm eager ter settle this long drawn game."

They started off together, the gambler sport slightly in the lead, his breast heaving with excitement, and his eyes on fire.

From under the brim of the laced sombrero he was closely watched by the giant, not with a look indicative of suspicion, but full of triumph.

Almost without warning of any kind, the two men burst into the mountain camp where a few hours before Cold-Deck Carl had left Sutter enjoying the society of his long-lost daughter.

They surprised the reunited couple enjoying that reunion still, and not until Zoe, glancing up at the sound of a footfall, beheld them was their presence discovered.

Instantly with a start and a cry the young girl sprang up, and would have rushed toward Hercules if his look and a wave of his hand had not kept her aloof.

"My God! those enemies together? What does it mean?" cried the Arizonian.

"We ar' hyer on business," broke forth the impatient Hercules addressing Zoe. "You ar' ter choose between us. Say which ov us shall be yer best friend, an' arter thet ther future will decide. It's twixt Hercules an' Cold-Deck, this time fer keeps. We hev taken an oath ter abide by yer decision, Zoe. Side by side we

swore it in ther mountains. Don't be hasty. You ar' ter drive one ov us away ferever. If it's ter be Hercules he'll turn his back on yer an' walk off like a man. If Cold-Deck's rejected, he'll do ther same. Look back an' see what I've been ter yer an' then glance over all thet Cold-Deck hez done. Draw ther line between us an' draw it fair. I'm ready fer yer decision, Zoe. Hercules Goldspur is no coward!"

The girl glanced at her father who understood it all.

"Take your choice," he whispered. "There they stand. One of those men you will love if you do not already. It is a choice for life, my child. May Heaven guide you!"

For a minute the fair young creature stood before the two handsome men who faced her with figures drawn to their true stature, and all expectancy and half-subdued excitement.

It was a moment of thrilling suspense.

All at once Zoe sprang forward with a cry.

"I choose the only man I can ever love!" she said, and the next moment the strong arms of Hercules Goldspur encircled her!

With a look that seemed capable of killing, Cold-Deck Carl wheeled upon the embracing couple and for a moment feasted his furious eyes upon the scene.

"It's ag'in' me!" he suddenly grated. "Hercules Goldspur, ez I might hev expected, you've won the game."

"Yes, I hev won!" was the quick response.

"Zoe hez made her choice. Now we'll see ef Cold-Deck Carl is man enough ter keep his oath."

"Ov course he is! He turns his back ferever upon Zoe an' her mountain pard; but afore he goes, he leaves his farewell in ther shape ov this!"

An instant later the gambler-sport stopped, not more than twenty yards away, with a cocked revolver in his right hand.

"I shoot my compliments through bone and blood!" he continued, flendishly, as the revolver covered Hercules Goldspur. "I break ferever ther power ov ther velvet hand!"

Less than these was enough to rouse the Idaho giant.

He cast Zoe from his arms, and with a hand leaping at his own revolver, sprang toward the cool villain.

"Not fer Cold-Deck!" was the hiss that met him, and with the final word the sport's weapon spoke.

There was a cry and a stagger backward, and The Man of the Velvet Hand fell at Zoe Sutter's feet!

The sport's oath was his lie.

A moment of horror followed the most cowardly shot ever fired in the Northwest.

Cold-Deck Carl remained in his tracks for a second, and then, with a glance toward the young girl whom his shot seemed to have paralyzed, he whirled with a mocking laugh.

Suddenly Zoe sprang toward Hercules Goldspur and cast herself upon the body.

"This makes me a child of vengeance!" she exclaimed. "The liar and his oath shall per together."

The gambler sport was too far away to hear the last words; but he looked back and saw for the last time the tableau the little camp contained.

"We've settled it ferever between us," he laughed. "Thar's nothin' like a six-shooter fer bluffin' ther man with ther best hand."

Then he passed out of sight with the best hand of all in the grasp of a man he had almost forgotten.

CHAPTER XXXV.

WITH HIS BOOTS ON.

"OUT fer an airin'! By Jehosaphat! I feel like a mornin' star. Wonder whar Hercules is? Ef we don't run across 'im soon, George, we'll not git ter make ther Banded Three ov Idaho felt. Got away with the sneakin' Injun slick, didn't we, pard? Thet yallar Poker Queen guided him to our hospital. Didn't I hear her laugh arter I hed dropped ther red? When we find Hercules an' help 'im to ther lost angel ov thet Arizony ranch, we'll go back ter Silver Bow an' set up in ther loasin' b'izness ag'in."

Need we say from whose lips these words fell?

The speaker leaned against the side of a demure-looking donkey with the warm beams of the sun on his somewhat bleached face, and he laughed at his last words, while his bronze hand patted the animal's shoulder.

All at once, however, the Happy Rattler started up and glanced at the donkey with a triumphant twinkle in his eyes, as he drew a formidable six-shooter.

"Durned ef I knowed we war a trap, George," he exclaimed. "Hyar comes ther meanest skunk thet ever turned j-ck. Walk on, my gentle evergreen, an' hev yer top branches nipped by a cruel frost from Silver Bow. George, you know thet cherub. He's ther chap what introduced us to ther Black Bonanza once."

The man discovered by the sharp eyes of the man from Silver Bow was now plainly visible making his way up a mountain path, not in the least aware that the gaze of a bitter enemy was fastened upon him.

The Rattler's first "airin'" after being shot,

by Red Fox, the Sioux, had brought him face to face with Cold-Deck Carl, fleeing from the scene of his last dastardly shot in Sutter's little camp.

His eyes fairly blazed while he watched the gambler-sport, and suddenly, as he left his long-eared pard and strode forward, his hand went up and Carl was covered.

"I've got you, my beau ideal!" were the words that warned the sport of his danger, for as he recoiled, he saw the man and his revolver in the path before him.

"Throw up them hands ov yers, but first toss yer weepins over yer head," continued the Rattler.

"Cold Deck Carl, I'm ther gent what inspected ther Black Bonanza at yer suggestion. Behold in me ther representative ov Silver Bow society. That's sensible! That's a nice revolver you've thrown away. Who war its last victim?"

The lightnings of vengeance danced in Cold-Deck's eyes.

"Your last pard, I guess," he said.

"Not Hercules?"

"Ask the girl whose choice operated my trigger."

"I will when I've settled with you. We'll now proceed to bizness."

As he finished the Happy Rattler gave a whistle which brought the donkey forward.

"Hyer! tail about, pard," he said, addressing the animal, and in a moment Kicking George stood in the middle of the trail with his tail toward wondering and pistol-threatened Cold-Deck Carl.

"Kick fer revenge, pard," whispered the Rattler. "It's Cold-Deck this time, an' not a whisky-counter."

Then he wheeled upon the gambler-sport.

"Forward! Cold-Deck!" he commanded.

The sport hesitated.

What! walk straight upon the heels of that donkey whose heel-powers he had already witnessed?

Yet, what else could he do?

He was at the mercy of the Rattler's revolver, and between it and the mule's heels there was little hope.

"Ar' you afraid ov my battery?" laughed the Man from Silver Bow. "It's a daisy affair, Cold-Deck. That ain't another like it at this writin' in Idaho. Just give it a trial an' of its suits, please give me a certificate ov its powers. Forward!"

"Upon the heels of that infernal beast? Never!" cried the gambler-sport, planting himself firmly on the trail. "I'm not goin' ter be kicked to pieces. You dare not give me a show. Let me recover my revolver—"

"Forward!"

"I will not! Shoot me whar I stand!"

"Hang me if I don't!"

Hard upon the last word sounded the report of a revolver, and Cold-Deck Carl wheeling half-way round, grated his teeth, and uttered a mad oath.

"Only a shoulder shot!" laughed the Rattler. "Now, my beau ideal, forward march!"

If stubborn before, the gambler-sport was now as immovable as a rock.

His almost bloodless lips were glued together, and his eyes confirmed the resolution he had made.

"I'd sooner be riddled with bullets than kicked once by a mule," he said to himself. "Such a death as he would force me to shall not end Cold Deck Carl's career."

Then he shouted to the Man from Silver Bow.

"Ef you mean to kill me, open on me in earnest. You have no power to force me upon the heels of your pard."

The dead-beat laughed derisively.

"Fer ther last time—forward, Cold-Deck!" he exclaimed.

The only reply was a cold sneer that matched well the sport's mad look.

He saw the Rattler's eye drop to a level with the revolver, and heard what he expected to hear—another report.

This time he reeled back several feet, but did not fall.

"Shot again—the other shoulder!" he cried. "The devil is going ter maim me an' then tie me to his animal's tail. My God! have I lived for this?"

Down the trail with victory in his eyes came the Man from Silver Bow.

"Daddy wanged, eh?" he exclaimed. "I'll turn my battery on ye whether ye wish it or not."

The donkey was at his heels.

"Hyer!" suddenly rang out a voice that made the Rattler pause. "That man belongs to us!"

Cold-Deck Carl looked up.

"Great Heavens—Zoe!" he cried, for it took but a glance to enable him to recognize the slender creature who stood slightly above the trail with a rifle at her shoulder.

"Caught in a daisy!" he said, "Heavens!" he grated. "But I'm no daisy! I'm like a whipped dog. I've not lived an' I'll make a dash for power!"

He sent up to Zoe a shout of defiance.

Just behind him lay the weapons he had cast

upon the trail at the Happy Rattler's first command.

If he could reach the revolver, he might win the battle going hard against him.

He made a dash for the weapon.

The Rattler saw the movement and threw a quick glance at the girl whose rifle covered him.

"Stand!" she answered. "Give the wretch a show which is more than he gave Hercules."

Cold-Deck Carl picked up the revolver with an ejaculation of joy and whirled as its lock clicked.

"You first!" he said with a look at the Rattler, and a second later a heavy figure staggered against the donkey's saddle.

"Now, my ranch rose!"

He sprung toward Zoe with his right hand raised despite the pain in the wounded shoulder, but the weapon that cracked a second later was not his.

The man who dropped a revolver on the trail and then recoiled to fall on his back with a dull thud was one of the most desperate characters of the new Northwest—Cold-Deck Carl.

Zoe came down to the tragic spot with a coolness that amazed the man who had got upon his feet and was supporting himself against the astonished donkey.

"You dropped him, my honeysuckle, but he winged me first," said this worthy. "You ar' avengin' Hercules, I suppose?"

"Not so much as I am paying that man for his treachery," was the reply. "Hercules, thank Heaven! will never die by that villain's hand."

"What! didn't Cold Deck wipe him out?"

"He attempted to, but Heaven foiled the wretch."

"That strikes me favorably. Hercules an' I ar' pards; shook hands ter ther effect ther day arter we had a bout among ther mountains. I guess I ain't much hurt this time. Ther Injun gave me ther worst dig I've had fer years."

Zoe had walked forward and taken a look at the man lying across the trail.

He was dead!

"Will you go with me?" she asked, coming back to the Rattler.

"Surely. Ef I stay much longer in these parts I'll go back ter Silver Bow a reglar sieve. Lead ther way, my fair conductor."

An hour later the twain reached a certain place, where the Happy Rattler met Hercules Goldspur, who was recovering slowly from the effects of Cold-Deck Carl's shot.

"You'll fergive me fer wipin' out yer pard?" said the Rattler.

"What pard?"

"The red'un. Came inter my quarters, whar I war convalescin', an' my pistol went off an' dropped 'im. He war only an Injun anyhow, Hercules."

The giant smiled.

If the reader could have visited a certain well-stocked ranch in Arizona several months after the last scene described above, he might have seen a fine-looking man, whose most conspicuous article of wearing apparel was a laced sombrero, enjoying the society of a beautiful young woman.

Near by is a fine-looking, elderly man, who puts in a word now and then, and always eyes the younger couple with a great deal of interest.

It is the home of Ferdinand Sutter, the ranch prince of the territory, and the other occupants of the porch are—need we say it, reader?—Hercules Goldspur and Zoe—Zoe, the long-lost, but found, heiress of an old man's love and wealth.

The trails that ended far away are not forgotten, and the trio often recall the scenes through which we have been permitted to take the reader, from the cabins of Indian-raided You-Bet, to the end of the desperado's trail.

As for the Happy Rattler and pard, let us say here that if they are not bonanza kings, they fill once more their old places among the shanties of the oft-mentioned Silver Bow.

THE END.

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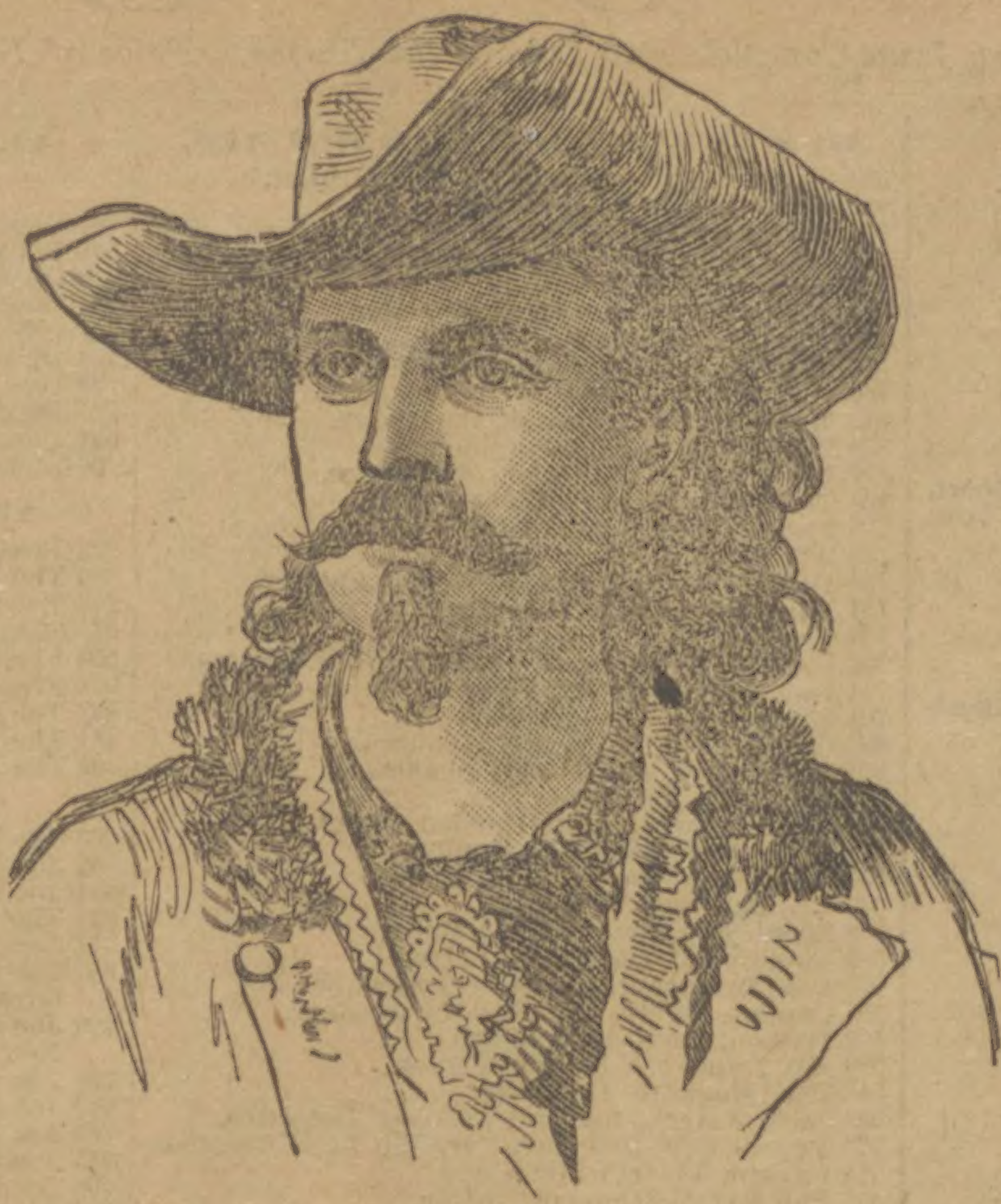
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